スレイヤーズ

10 ソラリアの謀略

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ファンタジア文庫

スレイヤーズ10

ソラリアの謀略

割れたクリスタル・ケースの中から、
封じられていたキメラたちが、次々と這い出して来る!

ルークの剣のひと薙ぎは、
ゾードの脇腹を深々と切り裂いた!
だが――!!

SLAYERS

VOL.10: THE EVIL DEVICES IN SOLARIA

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Going Around East to West, We are Searching for a Magical Sword

Silence—

Silence filled the air in the darkness of the ruin that had fallen into decay.

Gourry and I were hiding, we almost stopped to breathe, and we tried hard to sense something.

Only time passed by in the silent place.

There was a light of magic hanging above our heads, which I had placed. And I felt as if the light slightly moved.

Then—

Was it several minutes or was it only a second? I didn't know—but we did sense something!

—Gourry!

Before I called for him, he turned around and faced to something came out of the wall, holding his sword in his hands.

"Haa!"

With his sharp shout, the blow of blade glittered in the air.

With a light sound of wind, his blow bisected the thing that came out of the wall—a ghost.

Heeeeeeeee!

The ghost gave a shout which echoed in my brain, and its misty-like white body vanished in the darkness.

"… Did I… kill it?"

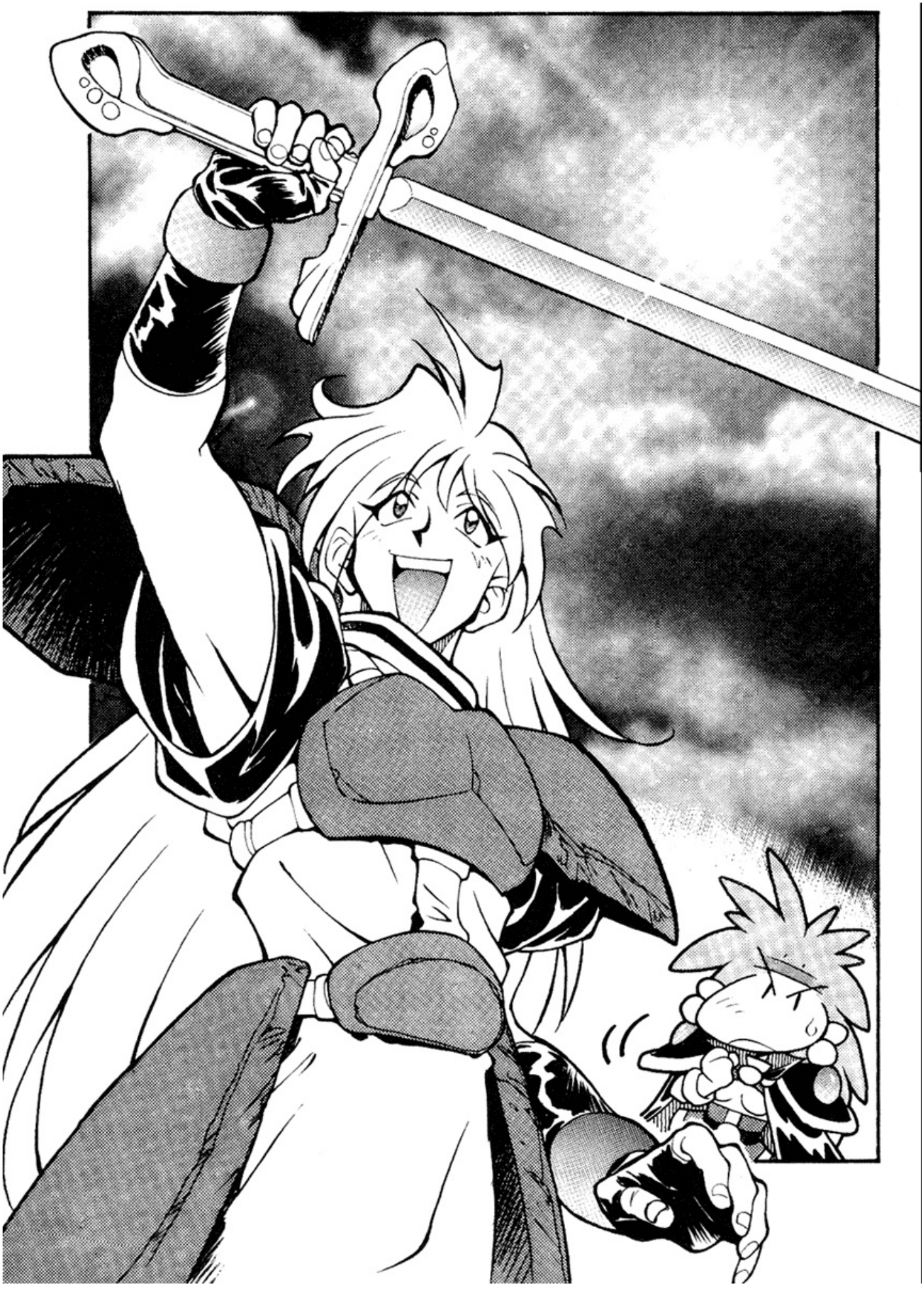
Gourry asked me, still holding his sword in his hands. I nodded.

"Oh, yes! I did it! I DID IT!"

Pleased, he held his sword high above his head.

… Hey, you killed only one ghost… how are you so pleased?

I was so embarrassed at his over pleasure, and I stood still there.



“I mean that you have not been satisfied by killing only one ghost.”

I said to Gourry.

After we completed our small task.

We were eating our supper at a restaurant in a small town.

“But, you know. My previous sword couldn’t cut a ghost, but this time I could. Isn’t it great?”

He was eating a fried fish which had been just brought to him.

I sighed a deep breath.

“Hey, you…

Once you had the Sword of Light, do you remember? Or do you forget about it?”

“… Well, I remember it. I don’t forget it.”

His words sounded hollow.

… Oh, my…

—The Sword of Light—

Among those famous legendary swords, the Sword of Light was one of the most famous one. There were several saga in which the Sword of Light appeared, so, some ordinary people had chances to hear the songs from some wandering minstrels. That was why the Sword of Light was famous not only among the sorcerers but among people.

To tell the truth, Gourry had been the Swordsman of the Sword

of Light.

But there had been complicated incidents, and the Sword of Light had been lost. Therefore, I and Gourry were traveling around to look for a new magical sword.

If you thought that an ordinary good sword was enough, you were too optimistic.

There were several existences that couldn't be killed by an ordinary sword.

The ghosts were weak ones, and pure Mazoku were strong ones. When we confronted a ghost, I could kill it with one offensive spell, and Gourry could do nothing but to watch my casting a spell. But, when we confronted a Mazoku, the situation couldn't be the same.

A few weeks earlier, we actually had confronted a Mazoku, and at that time Gourry had an ordinary sword. I could defeat the Mazoku, but Gourry had been useless.

I was angry and anxious about him, and I bought him a cheap magical sword at a shop of magic items in a small town.

And on that day, we took a job to defeat a ghost in the ruins with low wages which we wouldn't take usually. We took it because we were in need to test the magical sword.

"Now, listen to me, Gourry."

I picked a fork up with my fingers and swung it before his eyes meaninglessly.

"You can cut a ghost with that sword.

But the sword is an ordinary one. It is coated with silver and is sharpened and strengthened by jewel-amulets. That's all.

It can cut a ghost, but it neither knock away a magic spell nor cut a Mazoku.

In addition—

It's natural for an ordinary sword, you know. If you treat it in a wrong way, it can be broken."

"… I see."

Gourry stopped his knife and fork, looked at the sword which he rested against the table, and said.

"It's a cheap one, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes! It's cheap! Actually!

But do you remember who paid for it?

… It is cheap as a magical sword, but still it is one of the magical items!

You could buy ten ordinary swords at the price of this sword!"

"Then, it is an expensive one."

"You're right!

Now you know. Be careful to use it.

You have to mind you have an ordinary sword.

Understand?"

"… Hmmmmm…"

He groaned, scratching his head.

"… Hey, Gourry. If you dare say 'I didn't hear that' or 'I heard it, but I forget it', I will knock you down completely."

"Yes, I hear it and I remember it.

I can't cut a magic spell or a Mazoku with this sword, and when I use it in a wrong way, the sword can be broken, right?"

Wow! How rare it is for Gourry to listen to my words!

"You're right. But then, why you groaned?"

"Well, I understand your words, but I don't have confidence that I'll remember the whole story until I'll fight again."

"Though you don't have confidence, you have to remember!"

I shouted at Gourry, stuck my fork on the roasted chicken on my plate, threw it into my mouth, chewed and swallowed it.

"This sword is a makeshift until we'll find a better one!

Treat it rightly! Understand?"

"…Yes …yes."

He seemed to be overwhelmed by me, he nodded, holding a fried shrimp stuck on his fork.

Please don't call me a carping girl. That magical sword is expensive. When we find a better one, we'll sell this sword as a used one. A magical sword can be sold at a good price even if it is second-handed. But when I'll sell a talisman which was taken from a broken sword, I'll get a smaller amount of money.

"… Hey, Lina. You say that we will find a better magical sword, but can we find it easily? We are looking for it for a few months, and only we have found are fakes and false stories."

"… It isn't easy, really. I don't expect to find ones here and there, but someday, we'll find one. I believe it and therefore I keep looking for it.

There always is possibility."

The last words were once spoken to me by a gold dragon. I drunk up my hot tea of herb.

Bang!

On that day.

That sound made me wake up in the night. I was in my room in the inn.

... What?

I listened carefully, still lying on the bed.

I could listen only the sound of whistling wind outside of the window, and singing insects.

... Was it an imagination?

Just when I thought.

Bang! Dang!

The sounds came clearly from the next room where Gourry was in. It wasn't the sounds of someone's falling down from the bed, but was like the sounds of struggling each other.

I didn't say a word, pushed my quilt aside, grabbed my short sword, and ran out of my room. I was in pajamas, and I didn't have any protectors on it.

I stood before the door of Gourry's room and said.

"What's wrong with you, Gourry?"

"Yah, Lina. I have a guest here."

I could hear Gourry's usual carefree voice.

... What? A guest?

"Come in. The door is open."

"……"

Being invited, I opened the door.

The room was small, and was lit with dim orange light of a lamp. I could smell the burned tallow of beast.

In the room, there stood Gourry, and a strange man who was unconscious and lay down on the floor.

"Hi, Lina."

Gourry raised one hand and greeted me.

"… Hi… Is this…"

I picked at the head of lying stranger with the end of the sheath of my short sword.

"… Robbery? … Right?"

"Yeah, you know it."

“The situation and the face of this man, I got no other answer…”

I checked the belongings of the robber, found a rope, and I bound his hands behind his back with his own rope.

… Probably, this guy planned to bind the target after he sneaked into the room and kept this rope. But his fault was to choose Gourry as the target. Gourry’s sense is too sharp, and no average robber can steal anything from him without noticed.

“… Well …then”

“Uh… gu…”

I resuscitated the robber, and the guy opened his eyes.

“…What? … Damn it!”

Finding out what had happened to himself, the robber began to struggle to get free from the rope. But I bound him so fast that he could only rolling on the floor.

“Stop struggling. It’s waste of time.”

“… No…”

He glared at me and stopped.

“… Well, well… Can you tell your story? Why did you choose this room and this guy as your target?”

“……”

The guy didn’t answer my question and looked the other way.

—Don’t you see why I asked the robber such a question? Do you think it’s better to bring him to the officers? Then, you are too

soft.

The robber looked for his target in a town. It meant that the guy knew the organization where he could sell what he stole or robbed from others.

If I could get information about the headquarters of the organization, I would attack there and get precious things! I could get reward for seizing the robber, and also I would get more money from attacking the organization. Sweet idea.

"If you don't want to talk, I'll make you want to tell. Understand?"

With those words, I pointed at him with unsheathed short sword. But the robber was calm.

"… Oh, no… How can I surrender to the girl in pajamas? If I tell you what you want to know, my boys will laugh at me!"

... What?

... He's right. I'm in pajamas and do not put on any protectors…

... Hmmm, wearing pajamas isn't good for threatening…

Okay, then!

"So, did you say that a girl in pajama isn't frightening?"

"Of course!"

"Then…"

I pointed at Gourry who stood nearby and said.

“How about being wooed by a guy in pajamas?”

“Noooooooooo!”

The robber screamed. My threatening was effective.

… I could see that Gourry twitched his face and stared at me as if he wanted to say something, but I didn’t care.

“Hey… hey… please don’t tell me that the guy…”

The robber glanced at Gourry. There was fear in his eyes.

“The guy likes men?”

“Yes, he does.” I answered clearly.

“… Hey!…”

Gourry tried to complain, but I didn’t care again.

“… I see! I see! I’ll tell you what you want to know! So, please don’t let him do anything to me! Please!”

The robber was almost crying.

… Oh, does he have bad memories or trauma?

Anyway, I got a chance to get information from the robber.

“First, I want to know your reason to make us your target.

I don’t want an answer like ‘by chance’ ‘by accident’. If you tell me such an answer…”

“No, I won’t! I know! Please!”

The guy glanced at Gourry again with the eyes of fear.

"… I heard your talking at the restaurant…

You said that the guy had a magical sword…

So, I thought that if I could steal it and sell it, I would have a lot of money…"

"I see.

Then, you mean that you know someone who will buy a stolen sword at a good price."

"… Oh, I don't know anyone exactly… I only heard of a person…"

The robber slurred his words.

"Hey, what do you mean? Whom do you heard of?"

"……"

The guy fell silent for a while, and said.

"Okay, I'll talk, but in exchange for my talking, I want to ask you a favor. Will you accept my proposal?"

"Your proposal?"

"Listen. When I'll tell you about that 'buyer', I'll sell one of our boys, you know. If they knew that I told the secret, I would be expelled—in the worst case, I would be killed.

When the buyer is investigated after I was seized by the officers, my boys soon know that it is me who tell the secret.

Therefore, I want you not to take me to the officers after I tell you about the buyer. This is my proposal."

“So, you mean that let me free you… correct?”

“…Uh… yes. You talk in plain words…

If you’ll free me, I’ll leave all of my money here!”

Giving me a timid proposal, he was watching at me to see how I was reacting to his words.

... Let me think. I dislike the idea to accept his proposal easily, but if I refused plainly, he would be silent about the buyer, and I dislike such situation as well.

—Yeah!

“I see. I’ll think about it.”

“Really?!”

“What?!”

I ignored Gourry and pressed to the robber.

“… Now tell me about the buyer. What is he?”

“… Well. There is a guy I know. And he has been poor.

But recently, he told us that he would buy us ale. I asked him what made you be generous with his money, and he told me his story. Once he got a magical sword by accident, and he sold it to someone. The person bought it at a very good price.—That’s all of his story.”

“Someone? Who is he?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you. There is a city called Solaria stood west of

this town. Do you know?"

"Yes, I know. Sorlaria is one of the biggest city in this area."

I didn't know about the city in detail, but I did know the name.

"The city has a castle in the center of it. The owner of the castle is lord Langmeyer, who rules this area."

"Oh, it will be a long story to tell."

"No, it can't be long."

The robber replied.

"To tell the truth, the buyer is lord Langmeyer himself. They say that the lord is eager to buy all of the magical sword in this area."

"Lord buys the magical swords, really?"

"I'm not sure, but the guy said so.

That's all. It's rather a short story to tell, isn't it?"

... *Hmmm.*

I knew that kind of story very well.

When a man wanted to collect magical swords, he had to be rich or to be a thief.

They said that men with power, namely, lords or generals, tended to have such kind of hobby to collect magic items.

But, if the robber's story was correct, I couldn't carry out the plan to knock out the buyer to get a new magical sword for Gourry. If I had dared, we could have been wanted by the city.

…Then, I'll choose the plan B…

"… Hey, hey! You believed me, didn't you? I tell the truth, so, please free me from this rope!"

The robber asked me, and I tilted my head a little, folding my arms, and said.

"… Well… If I freed you, you would attack another person, or you would try to sneak into our rooms again.

Therefore, I'll bring you the officers."

"No Way! Wait a moment!"

The robber's face turned red.

"You, liar! You promised me to free me when I tell you the truth!"

"You'd better to listen carefully."

I swung my index finger before his face.

"I said 'I'll think about it'. I thought and made up my mind to bring you to the officers. That's all."

"Damn it! You cheated me!"

"No, I didn't cheat you, you know."

I gave him a pretty smile.

"Bitch! Demon! Swindler!"

The guy showered abuse on me, but I gave him back a cold look.

"… Talk as you want, but I don't care such childish abuse. The

more you give me abuse, the more you reveal how foolish you are."

"What? … Then… Shorty! No waist! Flat chest!"

!!!!!

... Oh, I was almost provoked…

But when I got angry with his words, the robber would be delighted, I know. He might think that he won at the quarrel.

It's better for me to be calm. As long as I don't care his abuse, he will be more disappointed.

I pressed myself not to chant a spell like Fire Ball or something, and said.

"Are those words your worst abuse? I think they are dull."

"… What? …. Hmmmm…"

My tone was as cold as ice, and the man fell silent and his face turned red.

... Victory!

I laughed in my mind, but at that time.

"… Okay…"

The guy twisted his lips to make a bitter smile.

"… It's you who say that you want to listen the worst abuse. I'll tell it!

… When I told it to one of my friends last time, he was done with me. So this must be the worst abuse in history!"

“It’s interesting. Try it.”

“You are…”

I looked down on the robber, and the guy glare at me.

“You are less than Lina Inverse!”

(SNAP!)

“What did you say?! What do you mean?!”

“Nooooo! You get angry now! It’s you let me tell you the abuse!”

“Come on! Calm down! Don’t use a Dragon Slave here!”

The voices of the robber, Gourry and me echoed in the inn in the night.

“… Hmmm, I expected that I could have a better reward…”

I looked into a small leather bag and whispered.

I brought the robber whom I caught the night before to the officers and they gave me money.

The robber was one of habitual criminals, and the officer told me that he had stolen or robbed here and there. Still they granted me only five pieces of silver coin.

… I know that the robber wasn’t a vicious criminal… I know that the officer won’t give good citizens a lot of money… Still, five pieces of silver coin was beyond my expectation…

“Now I realize that if I want to make a lot of money, I have to attack robbers and get precious things from their secret base.”

As we walking down the street in the town, I complained.

“But, it’s better than to have no money.” Gourry said.

“Yes, it is… I know… but…

Okay!

Let’s go to Solaria city, and get two or three magical swords from the lord!”

“… Wait! Wait a minute, Lina!”

“… What?”

“Please don’t do it! Please change your mind!

Don’t you know that the target is the lord? If you blow him away by an offensive spell and take his things away, we will be on the top of the wanted list!”

… Oh, no…

Disgusted by Gourry’s misunderstanding, I signed a deep sign.

“Hey, why do you think that I’ll do such a violent action?”

“I don’t know the case that you didn’t do…

—Oh, well. I was wrong to say that. Please tell your story.”

Gourry swung his hands, realizing that anger in my eyes.

“I don’t want to be on the top of the wanted list.

I have a plan to negotiate with the lord democratically. I’ll tell him ‘If you don’t want me to tell the king about your buying stolen

weapons, then let us have one or two magical swords.' Do you understand?"

"How can you describe it as 'democratically'?"

"In my hometown, people say it's democratic!"

"What town is your home?"

"Set my hometown aside.

I won't go straight to the lord. The robber might tell us lies, so I won't make an action until I get a reliable proof.

… Now it's time to go, not to talk!

Let's go to Solaria city!"

When a city was growing big, the city was filled with energy and distortion.

Solaria city had such distortion in it.

It wasn't a dangerous place, but it was the city itself which was distorted.

There were many cities surrounded by walls, and Solaria was one of those cities.

—But.

The bigger the city became, the more the people gathered. People built their houses and buildings inside the walls, but there was a limit. Once the area became full, then people built the houses and the buildings outside of the walls, and they built more walls outside of the newly built buildings… The city repeated the construction of

the houses and the walls again and again.

At last.

Solaria city was separated into many blocks by irregularly winding walls.

It was just like a huge maze for those who weren't used to the city.

When we walked toward the castle, suddenly a high wall stood in front of us.

Then we had to walk by the wall and find a path. Even when we could find paths, we couldn't know which way would be the shortest. In the worst case, we did come and go in one area that wasn't related with the castle.

—That was why we, Gourry and I, were lost our way in the city.

"Hey, do you see the inn which we have passed by?" Gourry said.

"What do you mean?"

I replied in an irritated tone. It was evening, and we walked in the street.

"I remember that we had passed another inn with the same name. Do you notice?"

"Yes, I do."

"….." Gourry fell silent at my answer, and then he said.

"Are they chain store?"

“No! We are lost! We go through the same streets again and again!”

“Oh, I see.” Gourry clapped his hands with a happy look.

“It explains well.”

“… Yes, it is…”

I was so exhausted that I couldn’t shout at Gourry.

We arrived at the city several hours after the noon. We had tea at a restaurant we found first, and we started to walk in the city, going to find an inn in the area nearby the castle.

But we couldn’t go nearby the castle.

START
GOAL
START
ハアハア

"… Well, Lina, I think that it was better for us to ask the way to the castle at the restaurant where we had tea." Gourry said.

"I agree with you. But I didn't expect that the city is so complicated."

I said in a tired voice. At that time, I didn't know where to go, but kept walking.

There were houses on the both sides of the street. People were ready for their dinner and the street smelled tasty foods.

From one house, the smell of the boiled vegetables came out. The housewife might cook the stew. From the next door, there came the smell of roasted fat fish. From another house, the smell of broiling meat.

… Oh, I'm hungry.

I stopped my feet and sighed deeply.

"… Okay, we'll find an inn nearby, and we'll go to the block of the castle tomorrow."

"It sounds great. I agree with you."

Gourry nodded. His tone wasn't serious. Probably, he didn't consider anything.

The sky above turned its color into navy, the color of the night.

"Wow, I didn't expect that this city has so many big buildings."

Looking around, I said. We were strolling about the block where the castle stood in the center of it.

It was the day after we were lost in Solaria city. The night before, we stayed in an inn, and in the morning, I asked the landlord about the way to the castle area. Then we could enter the area.

The castle was the center of the whole city, and it wasn't small but wasn't huge, neither.

The structure and design didn't have striking features. It was constructed by grey stones, and on the wall there were normal decorations, which were neither pomp nor simple.

In short, the castle of the lord Langmeyer was a common castle thoroughly.

—However.

I noticed that there were several characteristic establishments around the castle.

When the city was growing big, people moved from the center of the city, and the center area became occupied by government offices and shrines. But, I could see that the new buildings in that area weren't those offices or shrines.

Those establishments seemed to be the offices or the shrines at a glance, but when we observe them, they were doubtful. All of those establishments stood in the sites surrounded by the walls. There were soldiers on guard at each building. And those guardian soldiers didn't allow citizens to enter those establishments for the reason of some unimportant matters.

The landlord of our inn told me that almost all of those new establishments had been built recently.

“Hey Lina. Can we find out what is going on here only by walking and looking around the city?” Gourry asked me.

“We can’t see anything only by looking around the place.”

“… Hey…”

We walked together. I looked around the buildings and Gourry did what I did, and he was tired of that.

“However, I can guess the situations.” I added.

“You can guess? What?”

“The landlord told us ‘there are many establishments which aren’t normal but are disguised as to be normal’. And we actually saw those establishments. Didn’t you notice? Those establishments are surrounded by the wall or buildings and there are soldiers on guard.”

“Oh, I remember that there are several standing guys who created cautious atmosphere.”

“Good job. I guess that all of them are the military establishments.”

“Military?” Gourry was surprised.

“Hush! Don’t talk in a loud voice!

Somebody could hear us talking!”

“… I see… But, if you’re right, then what does it mean?”

“Recently, several military establishments are built. And they say that the lord is buying several magical swords in these days…

From the information, the most possible conclusion is a revolt."

"….."

When I talked about my idea, Gourry fell silent.

"Let me explain more. The information tells me that they are ready for a battle. But the lord isn't a king, therefore, it isn't natural for the lord to attack one of nearby nations. Then, the imaginary enemy can be the one who is superior to him—the king."

"I understand. So it must be a revolt." Gourry said.

"There can be other possibilities. For example, the lord lets some men to study or produce some magical weapons and tries to sell the technology or the products to a nation. This story can explain the situation well."

"… Hey, hey…

If you're right, it will be dangerous to carry out your plan to get several swords from the lord, won't it?"

"Exactly…"

When I told the lord "if you don't want me to tell the king about your buying stolen things", and when the lord was planning for a revolt, my words meant "it's better for you to kill me here at once".

… Gourry and I can't be easy prays. But I don't need to make the situation worse.

"Okay, plan B, then! We'll get a clue of lord's revolt, bring the clue to the king, and from the king we'll get at least one magical sword! It's the best idea!"

“… Anyway, your plan is always cunning…”

“How dare you say that I’m cunning? Let’s imagine what will happen when the lord actually incite a revolt against the king! Many people will be injured or dead!

We’ll prevent it. Is there any problem to get the reward from the king?

Or— Do you mean that it’s better for us to turn a blind eye on the possibility of a revolt?”

“Oh… No, I don’t.”

“Okay!

Then geed deeds should be done quickly!

We’ll start looking for clues of lord’s revolt tonight, sneaking into one of those establishments!”

No other sounds but the whistle of wind filled the city in the night.

If there was a bar or pub, I could hear some noises, but there weren’t such things in the center of the city.

The darkness overwhelmed the streetlamps, which had dim light made by Lighting spell.

There was a half-moon in the sky, and when the clouds hid the moon, all I could see was darkness except the area nearby a streetlamp.

Hiding in the darkness—

Gourry and I run through the streets in the night, aiming for a building which I had chosen in the afternoon.

Both of us put on a black mask and a black turban in case of being watched. We put on dark clothes as well.

—The building I had chosen was the one which was guarded by the most plenty of soldiers among all of the military establishments in the city.

The building itself was disguised as a shrine or something, but the existence of the high walls that surrounded it and several soldiers on guard in the nighttime, standing at the gate, told us that the building wasn't such a peaceful place.

I know that there were several such establishments, but I chose this one, because this building's guard was the heaviest.

The heaviest guard meant that the place was the most precious one for someone—in this case, for the lord.

If I had chosen another place which hadn't been guarded strictly, I wouldn't have found any proof of the plan for revolt. I didn't want to waste my time.

"Levitation!"

With a lowered voice, I chanted a spell and Gourry and I floated up to the dark sky.

"… Oh, my… There are too many soldiers on guard…"

Gourry whispered. He was hanging on to my neck.

I could see that, too. When we looked down the building and its

place from the sky, we could see how heavily the establishment was guarded.

The building looked like a shrine with a dome. It had several tree in the site.

—But, we could see soldiers on guard behind each trees and pillars. Those guardians looked about them carefully.

“Hey, Lina. We must be careful in choosing a landing place. If we landed on a bad place, they would find us at once.”

“I agree with you.

Now let’s find a good place to land on.

Shut your mouth for a while. I’ll bring us closer to the building.”

I controlled my spell and moved toward the dome of the building. Finally we were floating just above the building, and then, we slowly landed on almost the center of the dome.

The soldiers in the site paid attention for outside of the wall.

Rising up high by Levitation spell, and entering the building from above was most successful way to sneak into somewhere.

I took out a rope from my knapsack, bound one end of rope to the statue of god that stood on the dome, took hold of the rope, and slid down the roof.

The rope wasn’t an ordinary one. I strengthened it by a spell, and the rope could hold a small dragon.

I reached to the end of the roof, looked around to see if the

soldiers were watching at the roof, and looked down to investigate the building, holding the rope with one hand.

I looked around right to left, and I found a small door a little bit far away.

I sent a sign to Gourry with my eyes, and I moved on the end of roof toward the place just above the door, still holding the rope in my hand.

I observed the pattern of the soldiers' patrolling in the site.

—*Now! Go!*

I timed my action, and landed on the ground, and checked if the door was locked or not.

I found that the door was locked by a spell. Probably, it was the Lock spell.

I chanted an incantation with a low voice and pointed the index finger of right hand to the knob.

"Unlock."

I used the spell which I mastered recently.

… Kee…

There was a small noise of creaking.

Probably, the door was open.

I looked up the roof to signal my eyes to Gourry, and he came down to the ground as well.

Soon, both of us sneaked into the building through the door.

"… Oh, it's dark…"

I whispered with a low voice that could be heard only by Gourry who stood next to me.

Outside of the building, we had the moon light. If the moon was hidden by the clouds, we still had the star light.

Inside of the building, there was no lamp lit, and what we could see was darkness.

But, as I could feel the flowing of the air, I could see that we were in a large place.

There was no sign of life excepting Gourry.

"… Well … this place looks empty, isn't it?"

"Can you see something, Gourry?"

"Yes, I can see a little."

... Oh, I forgot that he has extremely keen eyes.

While I was thinking, my eyes got used to the dark place, and I became to the place.

… There was a stained glass on a corner of the roof, and dim light of the moon or the star might shine through it.

The first thing I saw was that the place was needlessly large.

Then I was shadows form endless lines in order.

"… Those are … the benches…"

Gourry pointed at a shadow nearby.

I got closer to it and touched. Yeah, it was a wooden bench.

There were many many wooden benches forming lines just like an ordinary chapel.

"…..?"

We investigated the place stealthily, and only we could find was that the place had a form of an ordinary chapel.

"… This is a usual chapel, isn't it?"

"Only this part of the building is like a chapel. But if this is a usual chapel, who will build high walls around it? Who will set dozens of soldiers on guard, and who will put a Lock spell on the door?

Do you think that it's possible for someone to make a chapel guarded strictly?"

"It's possible if the person is nervous."

"No, it's impossible. You forget about the cost for guarding a building."

"Then… what this means?"

"Probably, the main part of this establishment is placed another part of this building or in the basement.

When someone sneaked into this building and looked into this place, he would think that this was mere a chapel.

Even when the intruder found out that the place was camouflaged as a chapel, it would be difficult to find out a hidden

door or the switch to open the door.”

It was a possible idea that an armrest or a leg of one of those benches could be the switch.

I could have found out it, if I had investigated each bench under a light for several hours. But it was nighttime and we couldn’t have a light then. It was impossible for us to find out the door or the switch.

—I was thinking hard.

Jerk.

—*Oh?*

Gourry grasped my hand and pulled me without warning.

At the same instant.

Booom!

The light appeared in the darkness, and it just passed by my head!

Breaking through the darkness, the light impacted on the floor.

“… You have an extremely keen sense, you rats.”

“… And you hid yourself extremely well. I could see you only a moment earlier.”

I looked toward the place where Gourry looked at. There was a stained glass and dim light shone through it…

—*No!*

When I looked carefully, I could see a shadow was floating

before the stained glass.

There was a man floating in the air!

But I could see the shadow only a moment. He came down and melted in the darkness.

“Here he comes!” Gourry drew his sword.

“I know it!” I drew my short sword, too.

At the same time.

I felt that I saw something moved at the edge of my view.

Zip!

I turned around quickly, and something passed me by.

Probably, the man threw a knife or something.

The situation wasn’t to our advantage. The enemy seemed that he didn’t mind the darkness, but, we did mind it.

—*Alright, then.*

I chanted a spell in my mouth.

“Lighting!”

I created a ball of dim light and threw it over my head.

The light wasn’t bright, but it was more than enough for us because our eyes were used to the darkness.

After all we were found, and it was useless not to use a light. The light made us see the place better, and it also made the enemy blind.

Under the light, I could see the endless lines of wooden benches, white walls, and one figure.

“?!”

I thought that the figure was familiar to me.

I couldn’t see his face, but I recognized his clothes.

He hid himself by black clothes from head to toe. Only his eyes peeped through the opening of the black clothes.

But he had a different air from an assassin.

—Some months earlier, Gourry and I had been in the city of Bezeldo, and we had been against one of mysterious group over a mysterious sword.

The men of the mysterious group put on the same black clothes.

Anyway, what I had to was to escape from the place, not to find out what the enemy was!

“Get away!”

Watching the man covered his eyes with his hands, I turned away from him and began to run for the door through which we had entered the place.

But.

“No, you can’t.”

Another man in black appeared from the wooden benches and stood on our way.

No! Another enemy?

The man in front of us threw knives at Gourry and me!

“Alright!”

Gourry shouted and stepped forward, and he swung his sword!

Kin! Kin!

With one blow of the sword, Gourry knocked away all of the knives.

The man in black drew his sword. He saw that the knives were useless for Gourry.

Hey, man! Don’t forget about another fighter— me!

“Dam Brass!”

I cast the spell at close range.

No one can dodge this!

—But—

Booom!

To my surprise, the man in black knocked away the critical spell easily with the palm of his left hand.

—No way!

One Dam Brass could break a wall easily when it hit directly. If a man had knocked the spell away with his bare hand, his hand and body would have been damaged seriously!

“Ha!”

Gourry shouted, as if he stopped my hesitating.

Clang!

Two flashes knocked each other. They were Gourry's sword and the black-man's sword reflecting the Lighting. I could see the sparks came off.

At the same instant, I sensed an air of murder behind my back!

I didn't need to look back, because I understood that another man in black had recovered from the blindness by the Lighting spell and was trying to attack us.

I thought—if I dodge a knife or something that the enemy in my back threw at us, Gourry could be victimized.

Then, this is the best we can!

"Ha!"

I shouted out and kicked the floor as strong as I could. I jumped toward Gourry's back with all of my strength.

"Whaaaaaat?!"

"No way?!"

Gourry and the man were pushing each other crossing their swords when I jumped at Gourry's back. Both of them hadn't imagined my action and lost their balance. Finally, we three—including me—rolled down on the floor.

I sensed that something flew over my head.

Okay! I dodged it!

"Hey, Lina! Give me warning before you do something to me!"

"I'll listen to you later!"

Gourry and I stood on our feet, and I took a hand of Gourry and we run the last way to the door!

Bang!

When I opened the door, I saw the darkness and the coming soldiers.

It seemed to be impossible for anyone to break his way through the soldiers, but I knew that there were no guardians in the sky.

“Ray-wing!”

I took Gourry’s hand again, and flew up to the sky with a boosted high-speed flying spell.

We flew over the soldiers and the wall, and then still we flew for a while.

“Hey, Lina!”

After we flew to the area a few miles away from the chapel, Gourry said.

“What?”

“Are we going to go back to our inn?”

“Yes, we are! There is no other place to go!”

“Wait a minute! Those men are chasing us!”

“What?!”

I looked back in haste.

But I couldn’t see the chasers. It was up to the darkness of the

night and the shaking barrier of the wind.

At that time, we were flying fast with the boosted Ray-wing over the roofs. It wasn't possible for ordinary human to follow us.

"Are you sure, Gourry?!"

"Yes, I am! I can't see them, but I can sense two men are chasing us from the chapel!"

I knew that Gourry had a keen sense as a wild animal, and I knew that when Gourry declared something, it had to be true.

He said "two men are chasing us". Probably they were two men in black who had attacked us in the mysterious building.

When we were chased, it was bad for us to go straight back to our inn.

I changed the course of flight and we landed on the ground in the area where the buildings stood closely to each other.

There were only darkness and silence.

I couldn't see the chasers.

—But—

The night seemed to be peaceful, but I could sense a tense in the air.

Something—hid in the night.

It hid its existence under the darkness.

"Lina!"

Zip!

Gourry's shout and the sound of a flying object reached to my ears together.

Zank!

I twisted my body at the waist, but the flying thing cut apart the mask on my face!

Oh! It must be a knife!

"— No!"

I jumped back and turned around to the direction of someone who threw the knife at me. I could see a shadow appeared from the darkness.

—It's one of the men in black, as I expected!

Slowly, the broken mask fell down from my face, and my face was revealed under the moonlight.

"… Well?"

The man in black whispered when he looked at my face.

"… There must be something in that place, as I expected." I said.

"We only came to kill the illegal intruders. That's all."

I talked to the man in front of me, but the reply came from my back.

When I looked back over my shoulder, another man in black came around the corner of the building.

—Oh, we are sandwiched…

“Gourry, break our way through with your sword. We’ll run.”

Pushing my back on to Gourry’s back, I said.

“So you won’t fight, right?”

“I don’t want the things messing up for the present.”

There was another plan to surprise the city by a loud offensive spell, and get away from those enemies.

But I was afraid that they would make us as to be responsible for all of the happenings.

“I don’t know your detailed plan, but I see that we must run! Go!”

As he said, Gourry run toward the enemy in front of him.

“!?” The man seemed to be astonished.

I followed Gourry a few steps behind.

The man in black and Gourry drew their swords at the same time!

Clang!

The blades of both swords knocked each other and scattered white sparks in the darkness of the night.

Gourry let his sword slip by the blade of enemy’s sword, letting it go past him, and then he run the side of the enemy.

The man in black was in two minds for a few seconds to chase Gourry who ran away or to fight against me who was running closer.

Finally he held his sword at me.

—I expect that!

“Ray-wing!”

The flying spell created a shield of wind around me at a close range of the man, and the wind blew away him!

I flew to Gourry’s side and landed on the ground. As we ran, I chanted a spell preparing for the next chance.

We ran through the streets, went through the alleys, and we turned around at each corners.

If we ran on a long straight way, the enemies would throw knives of something to us. If we ran on a zigzag way, we could hide ourselves from the chasers easily.

... I don’t expect that the men will lose our trail so easily. They chased us even when we were flying with the boosted Ray-wing.

I found a narrow path and I told Gourry with a gesture to go ahead into the path.

Soon after I followed Gourry, I sensed that two men came at the end of the path behind us!

That narrow path was a good place for them to throw knives at us. I knew that we couldn’t dodge the flying things there.

But I expect it!

“Dim Win!”

At the moment when the men stopped at the end of the path,

preparing to throw something, I cast the boosted spell to cause a strong wind, which I had chanted before!

Booommmm!

A powerful wind blew through the path and blew away the men in black!

“Okay! Let’s run away!”

Even though the enemies were blown away, soon they would chase us. We ran faster on our way.

Finally, we came to another end of the path and ran into the wide street.

“Oh, my!”

I cried out and stopped.

There was a long wall running right and left.

That was one of the walls which separated the city into many blocks.

We couldn’t turn back, but if we would run by the wall, we couldn’t hide ourselves.

Then only we could do was to climb over the wall.

I chanted a spell quickly—

“Lina!”

Before I completed the incantation, Gourry shouted and pushed me away!

Booom!

I heard the roaring sound of the wind.

Something flew out the path and impacted on the wall.

It might be a ball of compressed wind that was created by a magic spell.

Then two shadows came out from the path as well.

—Oh, they are too fast!

Gourry, I, and two men in black. We confronted each other.

"Don't expect to run away from us."

One of two men in black said. His tone wasn't triumphant, but was very calm as to be weird.

It seemed impossible for us to run away from those two enemies without knocking them out. One reason for the situation was that we didn't know the place.

... Now is the time to make up my mind to fight, isn't it?

When I thought, it happened.

"… Noisy guys. It's annoying in the nighttime."

A voice came down from the top of the wall.

Being surprised, I looked up the wall, and found a black shadow hid a part of the starlight night.

The voice indicated us the person was a man, but he was hiding his face under cloth.

He seemed not to be a friend of the men in black, but still he was mysterious as well.

“What are you?” One of the men in black asked.

“Don’t be noisy. Don’t you hear me? It’s around midnight.”

The masked man on the wall replied in a calm voice.

“Are you a fellow of them?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then, mind your own business!

We are chasing the intruders who sneaked in to our building!”

The black-man’s tone was irritated. The existence of the fifth person caused unrest among the men in black. They (and I) couldn’t find out what made him interfered in our battle.

On the contrary, the masked man chuckled.

“So you mean that the girl and the guy are villains? For me, you two guys seem to be the villains exactly.

You may say that for you I seem to be a villain, because I’m hiding my face. I know it well.

Anyway, I also know well that you aren’t the officers chasing the criminals.”

“…..” The men in black fell silent.

Zip!

One of the black-men swung his right hand.

The masked man swung his right hand quickly, too.

In the next moment.

We could see that the masked man held a small knife in his right hand.

“No way!”

The man in black who had swung right hand gave a cry of surprise.

Probably, that black-man couldn’t stand the masked man and had thrown the knife, and the masked man had received it.

It was easy to describe what had happened, but to receive a flying knife in the darkness of the night wasn’t easy at all. I recognized that the masked man wasn’t a simple peculiar man.

“Now I know your answer.” As he said, the masked man dropped the knife.

“That knife teaches me that you are the villains. Then I can’t turn a blind eye to you.

… If we’ll fight here on a large scale, people will know soon.

The rumor will spread not only in this city but to the neighbor cities.

Okay, I don’t mind it.”

“… No…”

I couldn’t understand what the masked man meant, but the men in black were unrest apparently.

“Now, let’s begin.”

The masked man started to chant a spell.

“… Retreat.”

One of the men in black said in a low voice, and both of them jumped backward. They ran into the path where they had gone through.

“… Hey … hey, they go away without fighting. It’s different from our case.” Gourry said.

“I see… but…”

I looked at the direction that the enemies ran away, and then I turned my eyes to the top of the wall.

But I couldn’t find the masked man anymore.

“… Hey… Is it alright for us to get settled here and eat our breakfast?”

Gourry asked me in a low voice. It was the next morning of our sneaking into the disguised chapel.

We had the seats in the restaurant on the first floor of our inn. On our table, there were many plates of our breakfast.

“I’m anxious that they are looking for us.”

“Maybe… but I’m not sure. Frankly speaking, I can’t see what’s going on here.”

I said and ate a mouthful of bacon-lettuce salad.

“If those men in black were related with the lord, they would

place us on the wanted list. They can make up good reason to arrest us.

—On the other hand, they didn't want to make things known to the people.

Let's see. We sneaked into the establishment last night, and we couldn't find anything.

If we found some clues, they would do their best to find and arrest us. But they know that we couldn't find anything, they would prefer to leave us alone."

On that morning, I found that the soldiers in the city did the same routine.

From that fact, I got a conclusion that they determined to leave us alone.

Then, what we will do?

"When we choose to avoid danger, we have to leave this city soon.

But, if we leave now, we have no chance to see what's going on here. I don't like that idea.

… Probably, the masked man whom we saw last night knows something."

"Yeah, I remember him. He seemed to be very skilled. As far as I could see from his voice, the man isn't young…" Gourry said with his mouth full of a croissant that sandwiched fresh cream.

I stopped to eat, held my fork between two fingers and swung it.

“Another problem is this. Were those men in black the enemies we fought before?”

“The enemies we fought before? Whom do you mean?” Gourry asked.

“Don’t you remember the incidents in Bezeldo? We fought over a magical sword against a mysterious group. There were Luke and Millina, too, and they fought with us against the group. And in the end of our fight, there appeared an almost immortal monster and we had a desperate battle against it.” I explained.

“Oh, I feel like… I feel like that I fought such a battle before!” Gourry replied.

“Okay. There were men in black in the mysterious group. And those men in black dressed just as the two enemies whom we met in the establishment last night.”

“Does it mean…?” Gourry asked.

“It means as you suppose.” I nodded to Gourry. “There are two assumptions. That group which keeps looking for the magical sword by hook or by crook is slipping in the authority of this city. Or, lord Langmeyer is the wirepuller of the mysterious group. In any cases —” I stubbed my fork into a thick piece of ham and whispered. “I’m afraid that we will be involved in a troublesome situation.”

Suddenly, Gourry’s face twitched with strain.

“I think that we are now in a troublesome situation.” He said and pointed at a place behind me—at the doorway of the restaurant.

“?” I frowned and turned back.

And I was frozen.

There were two soldiers on guard standing at the doorway of the restaurant. One of them had a paper in his hand, and they dropped their eyes on it and then they watched at my face.

Wow! Are they coming to arrest us?

Two soldiers came straight toward our table. Gourry and I got up from our seats and were on guard against them. But they stopped in front of us and stood straight.

"Excuse us. I think that you are Miss Lina Inverse. Am I correct?" One of the soldiers said.

An idea to tell them a lie flashed in my head, but I abandoned it. I saw them had a paper, and it was possible that my portrait or information was on it. It was no use to cheat them. When they would check the list of the guests of the inn, they could find my name on it.

"Yes, you are correct." I kept on guard and replied. But the soldiers gave me a salute at my reply.

"Let me introduce ourselves! We are the guards of lord Langmeyer!" One of them talked loud. "We bring you a message from the acting lord. Please accept this. The acting lord hopes to talk with Miss Lina Inverse, who is the famous sorceress in the world. He hopes to invite you a dinner as well. Now, please tell us your reply to the acting lord!"

"What?" Both Gourry and I said in a stupid voice.

"Please, can you tell me what is going on?" Gourry asked me.

We were on our way to the castle. It was the evening of the day when we had been given a message from the acting lord, and the streets were filled with the sunshine of a setting sun.

“I can’t. I have no idea.” I said. It was true, because I didn’t have an idea that a man in the castle invited us a dinner.

“Only I can tell you some possibilities.” I added. “First. All of the happenings happen by chance. The acting lord has known my name by chance. And he heard that I was in his city by chance. And he sends his men to find me today by chance.”

“It’s almost impossible, I think.” Gourry said.

“I agree with you. Then, second. There are two confronting groups here in this Solaria city. One is the group of the men in black, and another is the group of the acting lord who is inviting us. The acting lord hopes to contact us by some means or other in order to check the action of the opposite.”

“It’s reasonable.” Gourry said.

“There is one more.” I continued. “The acting lord and the men in black belong to one group. And this invitation is a trap.”

“… I’m afraid that the last is most possible.”

“So you are. I think that the last possibility is true,” I said.

“Oh, do you? Then, why you accepted this invitation?” Gourry asked me.

“I felt like to accept it.”

At my answer, Gourry fell down on the ground flatly.

“How dare you to accept such an invitation only because you ‘felt like to’? It can be a trap, you know!” He complained as he stood on his feet.

“But, when the acting lord is confronting to the men in black, my rejection will leave him alone.” I explained.

“Yes, you are right.” Gourry agreed.

“And when the acting lord is the wirepuller of the men in black, do you think that my rejection will close all of this case?” I asked Gourry for his opinion.

“… Ah, I don’t think so.”

“I agree with you.” Satisfied with his answer, I continued. “So, it’s better for us to accept this invitation. We’ll be able to find something in the castle. When there is a trap, we’ll break it through, that’s all.”

“I think it’s a dangerous idea… But, yes, you always have dangerous ideas.”

“What do you mean? Don’t you have guts to confront with a danger? There is another reason for me to go to the castle!” I said.

“Another reason?”

“Yes.” I winked at Gourry and said. “I can’t stand to leave all the things unsolved.”

“Oh, … I forget that you are curious.” Gourry smiled wryly, put his hand on my head and said. “It’s no problem. I will go everywhere you go till the finish.”

“Thank you, self-styled guardian.—And now,” I turned my eyes toward the castle becoming bigger in my sight, and said. “Now is the time to go! Gourry!”

“I’m sorry for let you waiting for long time.” An old butler came in the waiting room where Gourry and I took our seats. He gave us a polite bow.

After we had gotten ready for the trap in the street, we entered the castle. They had welcomed us very politely, and had been escorted to the waiting room to waste our time till the dinner would be ready.

From the beginning, there had been no troubles there. Those men around there had no hostile feeling to us. The waiting room wasn’t big but composed of established furniture. In that waiting room, we had waited for a while and finally, the polite butler appeared.

“The dinner is ready now, and the acting lord is waiting for you.” He said to us. Gourry and I looked at each other’s face and nodded without a word.

Now, let’s start a game.

“I see.” I said and Gourry and I stood up from the seats.

We walked through the door of the waiting room, and went through the long corridor for a while. The old butler stopped at a door.

“Here is the dining room.” He said.

… Well, how will they welcome us?

“Please enter,” saying, the butler bowed and opened the door.

“?” Both Gourry and I were frozen at the doorway.

In the dining room, there was a long table covered with a white cloth. On the walls, there were lamps with magical lights. On the table, there were lit candles standing on the candle-sticks.

On the other side of the long table, there was a young man sitting on his seat. He seemed to be twenty-something. He put on the refined white suits—in other words, the snobbish suits, and the white clothes made a striking contrast with his bright fire-like red hair.

He had a beautiful smile on his handsome face.

Oh, he must be the acting lord.

But it wasn’t the young man which surprised Gourry and me. There were two persons stood behind the acting lord. The man with black hair and the woman with silver hair.

I could tell who they were. They were Luke and Millina with whom we fought against the men in black in Bezeldo.

Although I Don't Want to Act Secretly

"—Welcome to my castle, Miss Lina Inverse. I'm waiting for you." The man with red hair said and Gourry and I came to ourselves.

"Please come in, and have your seats." The young man stood up from his seat and invited us with a gesture.

"Ah… Thank you very much for your inviting us today." I said and entered the dining room. I was still embarrassed a little.

"Not to mention it." The man said. "It's a great honor for me to meet with the famous sorceress, Miss Lina Inverse."

"Am I … famous?" I whispered when Gourry and I sat on the seats.

I know that the acting lord has heard so many naughty rumors…

The young man sat on his seat again after he saw us sitting, and the he introduced himself to us.

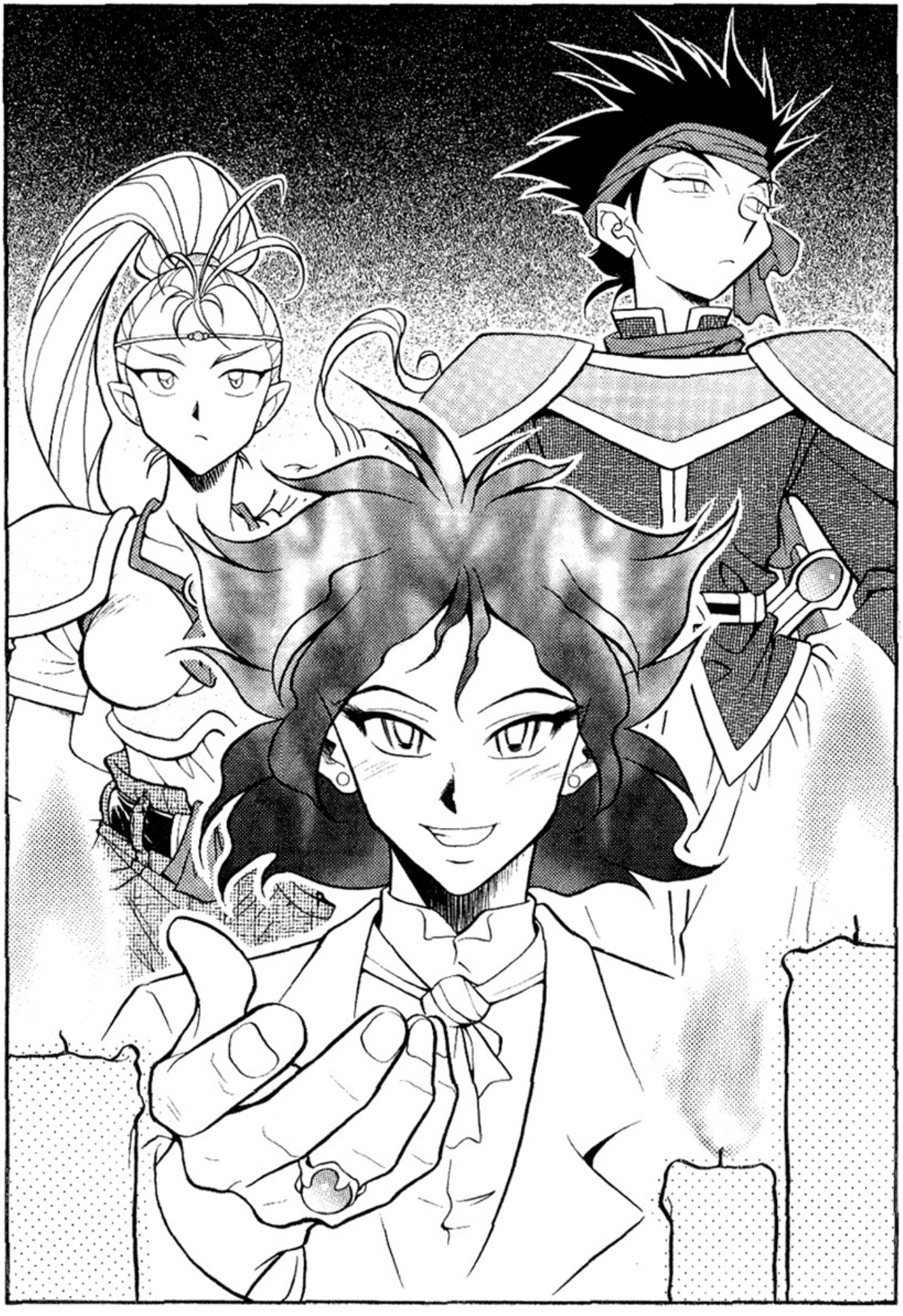
"Please let me introduce myself. I am Laavas Nexaria Langmeyer and I am the acting lord of this Castle of Welgis. The lord Clain, my father, is ill in bed for several weeks, and I have all of the responsibility as a lord now."

While the acting lord was talking, Gourry glanced at the two acquaintances again and again. Perhaps Gourry was eager to know the reason why Luke and Millina were there.

Besides, Luke seemed to be anxious about us and glanced at me and Gourry one by one. But his colleague, Millina had no feelings on her face as she had done before.

I wondered if Laavas noticed their glancing at each other, but he kept talking.

“I am interested in magic. No, to say accurately, I’m interested in the tales of magic.”



There came waiters out from the door behind the acting lord, and they brought a vowel of potage soup to each one of us. Laava kept talking.

“I gather the tales of some sorcerers, and recently, I hear a name in many interesting tales. It’s your name, Miss Lina Inverse.”

“But all of those tales must be horrible, aren’t they?” Gourry interrupted.

Hey, Gourry! Why can’t you miss such episodes while you miss many other important tales?

If it hadn’t been in the dining room of the acting lord, I would have kicked at Gourry, but the acting lord had a wry smile on his face.

“Ah… Yes, there are many bad rumors about Miss Inverse. But I think that the more and the greater the achievement one person has done, and the more famous the person becomes, the more people abuse that person. I always think the bad rumor for a person must have only a half of the truth about the person.

—I’m afraid that it is troublesome for you, but I have gathered tales about you, Miss Inverse.

I hear the tales about your being deeply involved in the struggle for power in the Sorcerer’s Guild in Atlas City and in the royal family of Saillune kingdom. I hear that you destroyed a group of cult in Kalmart, and you killed Zooma, a man called as the assassin of assassins. I also hear that you were related with the destruction of the capital city of Dilss kingdom and with the fall of Sairaag. I don’t

know how perfect those tales are, but there is no doubt that you are one of the most excellent sorceresses."

... *Oh, my.*

In my head, I admired him because the acting lord had investigated me so precisely. He kept talking.

"However, I know that a rumor is a rumor. Therefore, I am eager to hear about those tales directly from you as we have a dinner. Oh, I'm sorry to talk for so long. Please eat your soup before it becomes cold." The acting lord picked up his spoon.

"Now, I'm full."

Gourry said in a satisfied voice.

We were on our way to the inn after we had dinner with the acting lord in his castle.

"… I'm surprised that you ate so much." I said.

"Well, the lord's table is filled with delicious foods! I enjoyed them thoroughly.

But, you didn't eat much. What happened to you?

Did you eat meals for three or four persons at the inn to ease your stomach before we went to the castle? Oh, you did without my notice. You can't stand hunger."

I sighed a deep tired sign and said.

"You misunderstand me…

I don't mean that I'm surprised at the amount of foods you ate,

but…

Oh, I see. You forget that Laavas the acting lord can be our enemy, don't you?"

"I don't forget it. But he didn't do anything to us."

I sighed again.

"Well, I was anxious that the lord could order to put a poison in our meals."

"Poi…!"

Gourry gave a cry and stopped. He was astonished and I could see that it was the first time for him to see the possibility of being poisoned.

"Did you mean that there was a poison in the meals that I ate in the castle?" Gourry said anxiously.

"Don't mind. It was a matter of possibility.

You know that you ate plenty of foods and now you are alive and well. Now I guess that we weren't poisoned."

"You only guess? But, if you knew that before we went to the castle, why didn't you give me an advice at the dinner?"

"How could I?!

There is no proof that the acting lord Laavas is against us! How can I tell you 'Gourry, be careful with those meals. They may be poisoned' at the table where the acting lord shared with us?"

You may say that it's better for me to give Gourry a warning

before we went to the castle. I admit that I forgot to warn him.

"I, myself, can see if the meal is poisoned or not, by tasting it slowly and carefully. But it's impossible for me to do it when I eat in haste."

"Oh, I see. That's why you ate a little."

"Yes, you are right."

"But, then, do you know the taste of poisons?"

"Yes, I do. My elder sister taught me severely."

Gourry fell silent at my reply and then he said.

"… Well, I have this question for some time. Now I want to ask you it. What is your elder sister?"

"Please! Don't ask me about her, please!"

"… I, I see. I won't ask you anymore."

Gourry could see fear in my eyes, and he shut his mouth.

I began to talk about the invitation in order to change the subject and the air.

"Anyway, it's still mysterious for us the meaning of tonight's invitation."

"Before we went to the castle, we had talked that the acting lord could be our enemy, but when he met with us, he was listening to your talking your heroic episodes."

"You're right.

It’s possible that the acting lord had heard of me from his bodyguards, Luke and Millina.

Anyway, I’m still doubtful that those men in black and the acting lord are related. One night we fight against the men in black, and on the next day, the acting lord invites us to his castle. Are those happening occurred accidentally? I can’t believe that.”

“I understand.

Talking about Luke and Millina, I was surprised to see them as the bodyguards of the acting lord. Hey, Lina. Can we say that the acting lord isn’t on the side of those men in black because he hired Luke and Millina?”

“…Hmmm”

I frowned at Gourry’s question.

… I know.

In the incident in Bezeldo, Luke and Millina fought against the men in black together with us. Our team and the men in black fought over one magical sword.

Now, there is no reason for the pair of Luke and Millina and those men in black to fight each other. But it’s still unnatural that one group hire those who have fought against once.

“Anyway.

We have a problem of the person behind us first.” I said.

“I see.”

Gourry and I looked at each other's face, still kept walking.

I sensed since we left the castle.

I sensed that a person kept following us from the castle to the city.

If the person was our friend, he had to call for us earlier, but he had been silent.

It meant that the person was our enemy.

"Will we start?"

"Well… I don't want to guide him to our inn."

As I replied to Gourry, we stopped.

There weren't the houses or the pubs. It was a little bit later than the sunset, and the street was empty. The nightfall and the silence filled there.

Looking that we stopped, the follower stopped for a second, and then he began to walk toward us.

Then.

I sensed the air of murder at the same time I saw a light in the depth of the darkness.

The light turned into the lance of magical power and it came directly to us!

But the lance came from a certain distance and it was easy for Gourry and I to dodge it. Both of us jumped right and left.

"?!"

Suddenly, I sensed the air of murder next to me. I grabbed the hilt of my short sword on my waist reflexively.

Before my eyes, there came a black shadow out of the darkness!

—No way!

Clang!

I was going to draw my short sword when the shadow gave me a blow by his sword, and the hilt of my short sword barely stopped the blow.

—Wow, it was so close!

I was lucky neither to be hit by my berry nor to be cut my fingers off.

I knew that our follower had cast a lance of magical power from the point far from us. It was impossible for the same man to come to me so quickly!

Then, do we have two enemies just as the last night?

“Lina!”

Gourry shouted and he ran into between the follower—the man in black—and me, holding his sword in his hands.

Clang!

Gourry gave a critical blow at the enemy sideways, and the enemy’s sword, which was painted black, stopped Gourry’s blow.

The man in black cast a spell at Gourry without changing his

posture.

No way? When did he chant an incantation?

The spell couldn't have missed the target as it was cast at a close range. But Gourry dodged it by twisting his body at his waist and with he took advantage of this movement for his next blow.

The man in black didn't stop Gourry's blow, but dodged it by jumping backward.He kept a certain distance from Gourry, and suddenly, he turned his back at us and began to run.

"Oh, he is running away!" Gourry shouted.

"No, he isn't!"

I shouted back and began to follow the enemy.

"He means that 'catch me if you can'! Now chase him!"

"Why do we have to chase him?" Gourry complained as he running by my side.

"Why? He is luring us into a trap, then, we'll break the trap and find out some clues!"

"I see!"

We ran through the streets in the night, chasing the black shadow.

—But, we are chasing only one man. I thought that we had two enemies. Then where is another one? Or was it my imagination? Or is it a part of the trap?

When we catch the man whom we are chasing, then we can know

the answer.

Turning around the corner, running through the streets, the man in black ran into the gate of the building and went into the site.

"… Oh, is this…?"

Gourry and I stopped in front of the wall.

It was one of the secret military establishments.

The building seemed to be a library or a museum, but it had plenty of soldiers on guard.

But—

At that time, there were no soldiers on guard and the gate was open.

"… Hey, Lina…" Gourry said.

I turned my eyes toward the building.

I saw that the man in black stood by the doorway of the building and watching at us.

"… I see… He means to say 'come on, move.'" I said.

"So we move on, don't we?"

"Yes, we do!"

I winked at Gourry.

Both of us began to run toward the man in black again.

The enemy waited until we began to follow him again, and then he went through the doorway into the darkness in the building.

"… Hey, he is challenging!" Gourry said.

"Yes, he is, because he has confidence in his skill, in his trap, in both."

We arrived at the doorway just a few minutes after the enemy.

There came out a dim light through the slight opening, but I couldn't sense if somebody was inside.

—But I know that the enemy is here. He hide himself somewhere.

I chanted a spell in my mouth, and gave Gourry a sign with my eyes. He held his sword in his hands cautiously.

Bang!

Gourry kicked the door to open.

—But—

"Nobody is here."

Looking around the place, Gourry said.

Following him, I looked into the place.

The place was a large entrance hall.

The entrance hall was round and on the other side of the hall, there was a corridor. On the right side and the left side, there were stairs for the upper floor.

There were several candlesticks and a few of them had the dim magical light.

We couldn’t see anybody at a glance. But.

There were two statues of griffin on the right and the left of the entrance of the corridor.

We could see the statue on the right side was moved aside, and there was a hole on the floor where the statue had been stood. The dim light shone upon the stairs in the hole.

“Oh, he is inviting us openly.” Gourry said.

“Then, let’s go. I don’t want to refuse such a thorough invitation.” I replied.

We made up our mind, crossed the entrance hall to the corridor, and then went down the stairs.

At the end of the stairs, we entered another corridor. It was a simple white place.

Someone might use a lighting spell on the roof, and the place was filled with a cold mechanical light.

The corridor was short and there was a door at the end.

The scenery told us that there was a trap beyond the door. And we knew that we couldn’t turn back.

We walked through the corridor, put my hand on the knob.

I opened the door and a cold air came out from the other side and enveloped me.

There was the darkness beyond the door.

The light in the corridor shone through the room, and we could

see that there were something standing in the lines on the right and the left of the room.

“Lighting!” I cast a spell, and the light on the room.

“… Oh, my!”

I gave a cry of surprise.

On both side of the room, there were tubes of crystal, which were as high as to reach to the ceiling. In each crystal tubes, there were deformed creatures, which were similar to the humans or the monsters, floating in a liquid.

“… Hey, Lina… Are these things…?” Gourry asked me.

“This is the plant to produce chimeras. A big plant.”

The lines of crystal tubes were so long that the magical light couldn’t show us the end. Probably, there were more than one hundred of them.

“Then, the man in black is waiting for us on the other side of the room, right?” Gourry said.

“Probably.”

I looked at the crystal tubes. They were half-buried in the walls, and there were no place for anyone to hide himself.

I presumed the enemy’s tactics. When we would go on to the center of the plant, the chimeras in each crystal tube would came out, trying to sandwich us between the man in black and the chimeras. Then we had counter tactics.

I chanted a spell in my mouth, as we walked on the narrow space between the lines of the crystal tubes.

We didn't have to go so far.

"… Here we meet again…"

The voice came from behind us.

"?!"

We turned around in haste, and we found a black shadow stood near the door. The light in the corridor created a sihlouette of the enemy.

It was the man in black.

—But I can't say that this is exactly the enemy we followed. He hid himself under the black clothes and we don't know his face.

"Do you remember my voice?

Do you remember my name—Zain." Said the man in black.

"Zain?!"

I was so surprised that I forgot my chanting a spell.

"Who's Zain?" Gourry said.

"We met him in the incident in Bezeldo! He was the one of those men in black! And Zain ran away in the last stage of the battle agains the monster!"

I asked.

Zain was a skilled fighter, but we could defeat him when we

fought against him carefully.

“I hear that you sneaked into another building last night. I was totally surprised when my fellows told me that they saw you.” Zain said.

“… So, you mean that this city is your headquarters, don’t you?” Zain had been trapped into telling me clues before, and I tried it again.

“I won’t say yes or no.”

“You were trapped into telling me information before, but you aren’t now. Probably you become smarter, don’t you?”

“Talk as you like.” Zain replied as if he was talking about others’ affairs.

… This man’s impression is different from what I know before…

I could lead him by nose more easily…

“Anyway, you’ll die here.”

With those words, Zain got a severe air of murder.

I began to chant a spell.

At the same time.

Ping! Ping! Piiinng!

The crystal tubes between Zain and us on the both side of the laboratory were cracked without any sign.

The pouring “water of life”, which cultured the chimeras, hid Zain from our eyes.

On the next instant.

I felt an air of murder behind us.

“?!”

Gourry drew his sword and gave a blow as he turned around.

Clang!

Gourry’s blow stopped the blow by the sword of another man in black!

—Here we have another as I expected!

Then, I’ll fight against Zain in front of me.

I thought when I heard Zain’t voice in my back.

“—Good job as before.”

It came from the enemy who crossed the sword with Gourry’s.

… What?

I looked at the door of the laboratory in haste, and I found that nobody was there.

… No way!

Even when there was a hidden path in this laboratory, it was impossible for anyone to come around to our back in such a short time.

But it isn’t the time to think but to fight!

There came chimeras which came out from the broken cristal

tubes.

"Freeze Brit!"

I cast the spell at the nearest one.

This spell created a ball of ice and trapped the target in an ice. I knew that the space between the tubes weren't wide, and when I could freeze only one chimera in the front position, the other chimeras were prevented from coming toward me.

—But.

My spell couldn't freeze the target and vanished.

... Is it useless?

Oh, I see! This chimera has the element of a demon!

The chimera came so near that I had no time to chant a spell.

I drew my short sword in haste and held it before me.

To tell the truth, my skill of sword was excellent, but I lacked the strength to fight against a demon. When the chimera was composed of a human and a demon, it was impossible for me to kill it with one blow.

— *Then.*

Gaooooo!

The coming chimera swung its right hand!

Jump!

I kecked the floor, jumped into the chimera's reach, and squatted

down there.

Perhaps, it seemed like that I vanished in front of the chimera's eyes.

I jumped up and put my short sword up to the lower chin of the chimera!

Zank!

The blade of the short word pierced through the chimera's chin!

Gaoooooo!

The chimera groaned for the pain and struggled.

I left the hilt of my short sword in haste, stepped back and cast the spell which I had chanted while I used the short sword.

"Blast Ash!"

Booom!

The black thing enveloped the struggling chimera and another one behind it, and the victims turned into the black mist and vanished.

This spell was effective only for the living things or the things which had will. Therefore the things without life, i.e. the wall of the room and my short sword, weren't harmed at all.

I jumped to the fallen sword, held it in my hand, and prepared for other chimeras.

The laboratory was filled with chimeras. I could see a dozen or more of them there.

I could use the same tactics again, but it was too dangerous and troublesome.

... When I can use a piercing spell effective for a Mazoku like Gaav Flare, I can kill all of those chimeras with one shot, but Gaav Flare isn't possible to use now...

If Gourry wasn't busy, I could leave those chimeras to him and I could be an audience.

I couldn't look back to see what he did, but I could hear the noises of swords' knocking on each other. It meant that Gourry had a hard battle against Zain.

Those facts told me that it was I who had to do with those chimeras.

... When I can stop the chimera in the front position...

—Yeah! I have it!

I began to chant a spell in my mouth, while I restrained the cautious chimera.

Gioooo!

The chimera in the front position made up its mind to attack and ran toward me, but it was too late!

"Dynast Breath!"

This time, my spell froze the body of the chimera into an ice completely.

A Dynast Breath created an ice of magical power which could

freeze a Mazoku. Even when the chimera had an element of a demon and a some tolerance to the magic, this spell could be effective.

Usually, a Dynast Breath froze the target and then broke the victim into pieces. But I controlled the spell only to freeze the chimera, not to break the victim. When a sorcerer understood the theory and the composition of the spells correctly, he could arrange the spells as he wanted.

Okay. This frozen chimera prevents the other chimeras from coming toward us.

Then, I'll help Gourry and kill Zain first!

I began to chant a spell and turned back.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

They were still fighting hard each other.

Gourry wasn't easy on Zain. Zain's matching with Gourry was because of Zain's severer blows than before.

No way! How can a man be stronger to be Gourry's level in such a few months?

But, Zain made a mistake! He doesn't have to fight against Gourry and me together!

I stood behind Gourry and cast the spell I chanted.

"Flare Arrow!"

My spell created more than a dozen of flare arrows—just between Zain and Gourry!

“What?!” Zain shouted.

Boooom!

The arrows of fire poured all over Zain.

Usually, with this spell, a sorcerer created arrows of fire before his stretching hand. I arranged the spell to create the arrows of fire at a certain space.

Gotcha! Now it’s time to deal with the chimeras…

I was almost turning back when Gourry shouted a cry of surprise.

Again, Gourry’s sword stopped the blow of the enemy’s sword.

“To your regret, small girl! It was no use!” Zain said as he gave a blow.

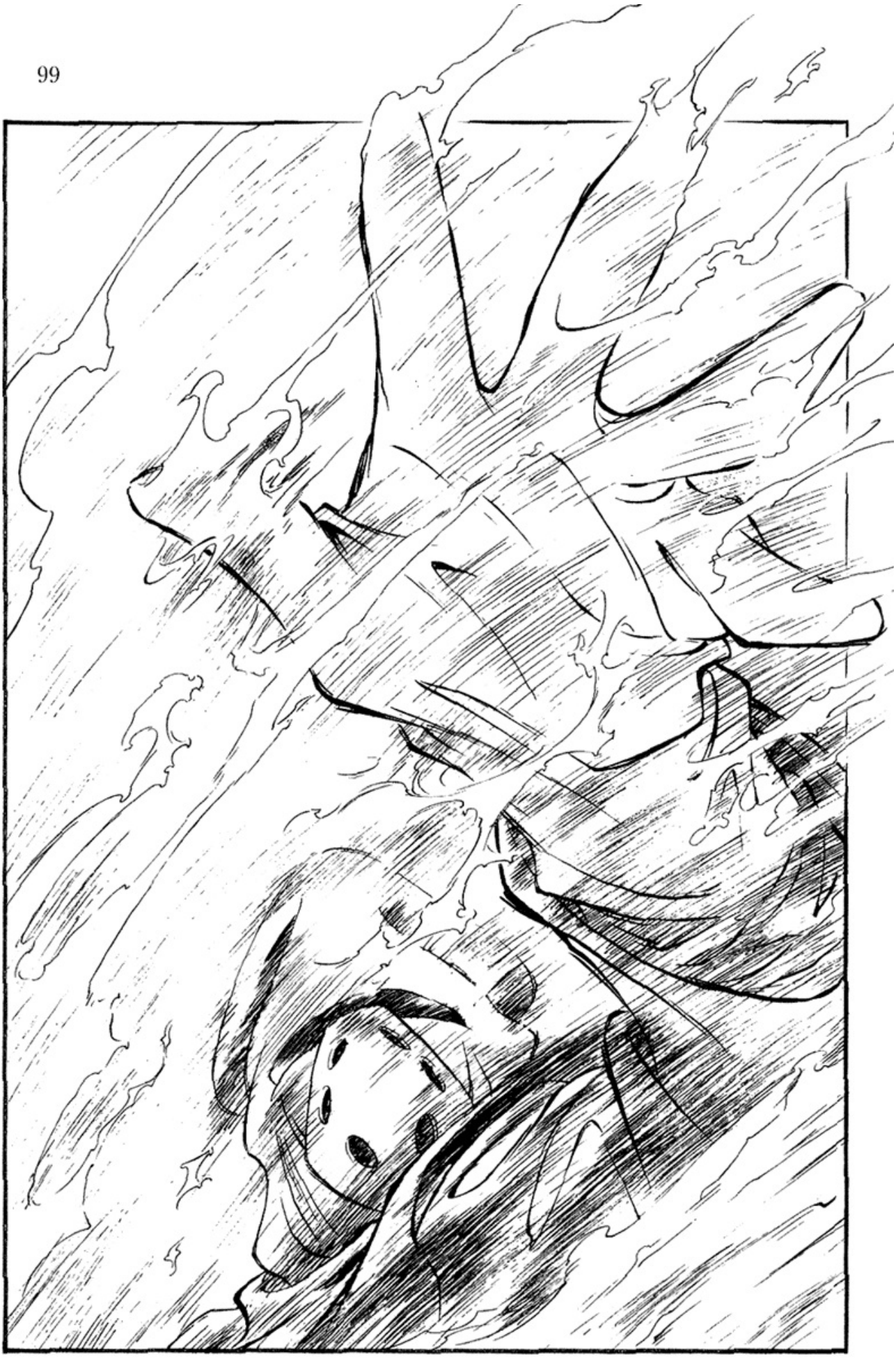
“Zain?!”

I couldn’t believe both my eyes and ears.

I could see that Zain’s black clothes were scorched by arrows of fire here and there. But his body wasn’t damaged at all.

Oh! Did he used a spell to protect fire, expecting that I would use a fire spell? Or else—

“Oh, no!” Suddenly, Zain cried out without any notice. He seemed to be surprised.



He was still fighting against Gourry with his sword, but he gave a look at me—no, at the place behind me.

I was cautious about Zain, and I slowly looked back.

... There isn't anything different from before...

... Yes, there is!

I could see that there was a frozen chimera, but I couldn't see any other chimeras behind it.

... Where do they go? Do they go up and out? Oh, can't Zain control those chimeras?

I realized that there was no more sound of the sword battle, and I looked back again. Zain stepped back far from Gourry.

Then Zain turned around and ran into the darkness.

"Is he luring us again?" Gourry whispered.

"No, he isn't!" I replied. "The chimeras aren't here! If they go out to the city, people get into a panic!"

"What?!" Gourry shouted.

I chanted a spell in haste.

"Dynast Breath!"

This time, the spell broke the target into pieces. What we saw there was the empty space, and there weren't any chimeras that had filled the space.

"What shall we do, Lina?"

“What shall we do? If the chimeras go out to the city, we can’t leave the situation aside! Anyway, let’s go us and see what is going on!”

Before Gourry answered me, I began to run.

Getting out of the laboratory, running into the corridor, running up the stairs and we entered the entrance hall.

“Here it is!” I cried out.

There was a chimera in the entrance hall. When it realized us, it gave a cry to warn us.

Zank!

Faster than I chanted a spell, Gourry jumped forward and killed the chimera with one blow.

Oh! Yes, you are strong, Gourry! If you have brain, you’ll be perfect!

“Is this the chimera you talked about?” Gourry asked.

“Yes, it is. And there must be more of them!”

“How many of them were there?”

“I’m not sure, but I think there were ten of them.”

There were no more chimeras in the entrance hall. There had to be several of chimeras still prowling around in the building, but some others might go out to the city. We had to do with those chimeras in the city first.

“Anyway, we shall go out to the city!” I said.

“Alright!” Gourry replied.

We run out through the door of the entrance and run into the city.

“Oh, no!” I whispered.

We stopped there. We could see the fire here and there.

“I can’t understand.” I said to Gourry.

In the night before, we had killed many chimeras that had gone out from the plant into the city, and then we had come back to our in pretending not to no anything, and had slept in the beds. In the morning, I had been curious about the situation, and after we had breakfast, I had went out to the city to know what was going on there, leaving Gourry at the inn.

When I came back to the inn, Gourry was waiting for me in the restaurant, sitting at a table for lunch. I took my seat at the same table.

“So you can’t find anything in the city. Do you mean that nobody knows the incident?” Gourry asked me.

“They are talking rumors. Moreover, they say that the city authority has announced that the incident was caused by a sorcerer who was on the wanted list, and that they already arrested the suspect.”

“What does it mean?” Gourry frowned and asked me again.

“In short, those men in black covered up the incident.” I said.

As long as the city of Solaria was their foothold, they didn’t

want to have disturbance here. We had found some bodies of chimera which had been killed by someone else last night, and I thought that those men in black killed them. They wouldn't be able to tell the true story to the citizen, so they had made up a story of a wanted sorcerer.

"But, I wonder why they didn't blame us for all of the happenings in these days." I continued. "When they wanted to do, they could, because they have both power and information. Still they don't. That's why I can't understand the situation."

"Oh, I understand why you can't understand…" Gourry said as he scratched his head.

"May I help you?" A familiar voice came from my side.

"What?" I looked around and found a face that I saw last night.

"Luke? Why are you here?" I said.

Yes, it was Luke, the black-haired fighter with unpleasant look to his eyes. I couldn't realize when he came by my side. To my surprise, Millina wasn't with him.

"Hello," Luke said friendly and took an empty seat at our table.

Then he scratched his head with a gloomy look and then he started to complain. "To tell the truth… I don't like to do a job for an errand boy… But, it's a request from my client, and I can't refuse it… That's why I don't want to be hired by someone…"

"Hey, it's you who spoke to us, and why you talk to yourself?" I said to Luke. "You are a mercenary, aren't you? It's natural for you to be hired by someone."

“Am I a mercenary? No! I don’t know how you estimate Millina and me, but both of us are the treasure hunters!” Luke argued.

“Really? Are you?” I asked.

“Yes, we are!” Luke insisted.

Treasure hunters were those who investigate the ruins or some places to find some treasures. When they succeeded, they sold the treasures to earn their money.

It was just the same what we usually did, and they could call Luke as a hired fighter or mercenary. But indeed, Luke had a right to call himself as a “treasure hunter”.

“Oh, I remember that you were looking for a magical sword when we met before.” I said.

“Exactly.” Luke replied. “In quest for the ancient treasures, we overcome many hard accidents, and finally we find out them! This is the true man’s spirit of romantic adventure! We are different from those mercenaries who fawn on a leisured rich man and are overworked. Don’t call me a mercenary.”

“But you actually are the errand boy of the acting lord Laavas, aren’t you?” I pointed out, and Luke pretended to weep.

“I didn’t intend to work for the guy! The reason why I am hired is…”

“Running out of money?” I asked.

“No! It’s because… Millina accepted the job without letting me know! I couldn’t reject the job!” Luke said.

“Why you couldn’t? You have a right to do, don’t you?” I asked again.

“Stupid! How dare I say ‘I dislike the job you accepted’ to Millina? She is my love!”

“It’s hard to believe that the man who talks about the man’s spirit of romantic adventure becomes a weakling when Millina tells something to him.” I said.

“Hey! I am a slave to her love.”

... No, you are only a slave of her…

“Hey, Luke. Don’t say that you are a slave of someone’s love.” Gourry interrupted with and embarrassed look. “It means that you are only under Millina’s thumb. As I am a man, I feel you pitiful.”

“Oh, how dare YOU say that to me?” Luke looked at Gourry and me one by one with ironic eyes.

“Don’t misunderstand me.” Gourry replied. “I’m not under Lina’s thumb. I don’t think about anything, and I don’t make up my mind to do anything at all. People may think that I’m under Lina’s thumb, but actually I’m not.”

... Hey, both of you seem to be pitiful, can’t you see?

“Hey, hey”, I interrupted because I realized that if I wouldn’t stop them talking, they would keep talking those pitiful tales. I looked at Luke and asked him.

“Now, tell me why you come here. You seem to know something about the happenings.”

“Oh, yes, yes.” Luke suddenly remembered his task and looked around the guests in the restaurant, and then he began to talk in a low voice.

“Last night, there came some chimeras and they fought against the soldiers, you know.”

“I hear of the rumor.” I replied.

“You don’t need to pretend not to be involved in the happenings.” Luke said. “The acting lord supposed that you had been involved in the happenings and it was he who covered up the truth.”

“Did the acting lord cover up the truth?” I asked Luke in a low voice as he did.

“Yes, he did. Frankly speaking, the acting lord Laavas wants you to help him.”

“Really?” I thought for a moment and asked Luke. “Is there a family quarrel?”

“Oh, you are so quick to understand.” Luke grinned at me.

It wasn’t a difficult conjecture. When the acting lord was against another group, the group had to be as powerful as the acting lord Laavas, and in the most cases, the boss of the opposite group was one of the blood relatives.

Luke explained. “According to Mr. Laavas, there is the elder son of lord Langmeyer, and his name is Baitham. Laavas says that Baitham is very ambitious and he isn’t satisfied with the position of a local lord. It seems that Baitham has planned something wrong and

dangerous. You know that his father, lord Langmeyer is ill in bed. It is his duty to be the acting lord, but Baitham forces this duty on Laavas and the elder brother is doing what he wants to do by his money and power."

"Is there the elder brother of the action lord?" I whispered. Luke kept on talking.

"Yes. And Laavas is anxious that someone may notice the actions of Baitham. When the king happens to hear of them, lord Langmeyer will be divested of the position of the lord, and in the worst case, all of the Langmeyers will be executed. Laavas wants to avoid the tragedy, and he is eager to stop Baitham peacefully. Therefore, the acting lord needs strong and skillful fighters. By the way, there are spies of Laavas in the group of Baitham. And they reported that Lina Inverse and her guardian stayed in this city. Then Laavas got an idea to hire both of you."

"I see". I said. The story of Laavas seemed to be logical. Luke continued.

"Last night those chimeras appeared in the city, and you seem to be two of those who killed the chimeras. If you would be arrested, Laavas' plan came to be nothing. Therefore, he circulated a false rumor that an wanted sorcerer had been arrested, and he also asked me to tell those stories to you.—That's all. Now I must bring your answer to my client. Will you help him or not?"

"Uh…" I scratched the back of my head. "May I ask you a question, Luke? Did you see that brother Baitham with you own eyes?"

“No, I didn’t. Laavas told us that Baitham had disappeared from the castle.”

“I see. Then, I can’t take Laavas’ proposal.” I said.

“Alright. I’ll tell him so.” Luke nodded at my answer and stood up from his seat. I was surprised at his quick action.

“Hey, wait! Don’t you need to ask my reason to refuse the proposal?” I asked.

“I told you. I don’t like to do a job for an errand boy.” Luke answered. “Frankly speaking, I don’t care if you’ll help the acting lord or not. For me it’s nothing to me to know the reason why you refuse his proposal.”

“And when you’ll go back to the castle,” I said, “Millina will blame you not to have my reason to refuse his proposal.”

Luke’s body slightly trembled, and he sat on his seat again.

“… I… I think it’s not bad to hear your reason to refuse the acting lord’s proposal.” He said.

“You have a huge weak spot for Millina, don’t you?” I said.

“It’s time to talk about you, not about me. Now, tell your reason for your refusal to help the acting lord.” Luke seemed annoyed.

“Oh, I won’t.” I replied, and both of us fell silent for a few moments.

“Hey… you,” Luke scratched his head. “You are kidding md, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.” Me honest answer made Luke silent again. “Well, well. I have my own

reason not to tell you. So, when you’ll be asked by Millina or Laavas, just tell them, ‘she was stubborn as a mule not to tell me the reason’.”

“I see.” Luke left the words in an irritated voice, stood up his seat and turned his back at us. After he went out through the door of the restaurant, Gourry asked me.

“Why did you refuse the proposal of the acting lord? As far as I can understand, the acting lord is in trouble. I don’t mind to help him, and I think that you don’t, neither.”

“I don’t mind,” I replied, “as far as the story of Laavas is true. His story is logical, but it doesn’t mean that the story is true. I suspect that the positions are changed.”

“Whose positions? Please tell me clearly.” Gourry said.

“I mean that it’s possible for Laavas to be the man who has a plan for a revolt, and for Baitham to be the man who is trying hard to stop his brother.” I explained. “If this assumption is true, we can see the story in this way. Baitham ran away from the castle because he was afraid to be assassinated. Laavas is trying to hire us in order to let us approach for the truth and if he has a chance he uses us to kill Baitham. Anyway, it’s only an assumption. We’ll decide what to do after we have evidences. In addition—”

“In addition?” Gourry asked.

“The masked man. Don’t you remember?” I said. “Tow nights

earlier, when we were chased by two men in black. And the masked man interrupted. I must find out who he is and what he does."

"Is it possible that the masked man is Baitham?" Gourry said.

"I think the possibility is very low…"

I answered, but Gourry insisted. "Don't you remember?There was a member of a royal family who came with you because of justice. I don't think it's weird that there is another member of a royal family who stood on the top of the wall in the night, putting a mask on his face."

"Yes… I do. And your consideration seems to be logical…."

"Now, we got a conclusion."

"Anyway, we have to find an evidence first. Let's go out to the city and get more information!"

"Hey, Lina?" Gourry said in a low voice.

"What?"

"I understand that we need to know what's going on here. I understand that we need to find a proof to explain the whole story. But is it reasonable to sneak into the castle in order to find a proof? I think it's too… dangerous."

Both of us put on the black clothes and the black masks, and we got under cover. After all, we had made up our mind to sneak into the castle of lord Langmeyer.

It was the midnight. The dark silhouette of the castle stood under the moonlight and the starlight.

“It’s no use to complain now. It’s you who accepted my proposal to sneak into one of their places.” I said.

“Yes, I did. But I didn’t hear that we sneak into the castle.” Gourry still complained.

“It is because I only said ‘one of their places’, not ‘the castle’.” I replied easily.

“… I see…” Gourry said in a tired tone.

In that afternoon.

After Luke had gone back to his job, I had gone out to the city and tried to get more information. In the end, I could find some information.

One. There certainly was a man with the name “Baitham” in the lord Langmeyer’s family.

Two. Laavas, the acting lord, had appeared some months earlier, and none of the citizen of Solaria hadn’t known about him. They hadn’t heard his name until Laavas himself came to Solaria. There was a rumor that Laavas was an illegitimate son of lord Langmeyer.

By the way.

I could find out that all of the happenings in Solaria city—Baitham Langmeyer’s disappearing from the city, the lord’s becoming ill in bed, and their constructing new mysterious establishments—started after the acting lord, Laavas Nexaria Langmeyer, had come to Solaria.

From those facts, I couldn’t remove Laavas’ name from my list of

the suspects.

I knew that there was a possibility that Laavas was actually an illegitimate son of the lord, and Baitham, the legitimate son, got an ambition after he had been told about his half brother.

… But, my gathering information got the poor fruits. I don't have a tiny clue for the most important matter… Who is the leader of the revolt? Anyway, when I'll find out which is the wirepuller of all those happenings, I'll be in the side of the opposite, and get a few magical swords or two or three hundreds of gold coins. It will not be so bad.

It was necessary for me to find out which side would be my enemy.

"Hey, Lina," Gourry asked. "When we will sneak into the castle, will we be able to find a clue or evidence there?"

"I'm not sure."

"…Come on." Gourry said.

"At least, the castle is the place where the possibility for us to find a clue will be higher than other places." I explained. "In the disguising chapel or something else, it's difficult for us to find out an evidence for a revolt. Remember. We sneaked into the plant yesterday, and we found a hidden stairs, and in the basement, we found a lot of chimeras. But we can't say those are the evidences for a revolt, and also we can't find out which is the wirepuller, Laavas or Baitham.

But when Laavas is the wirepuller, we can find a clue in the

castle. For example, one group of the men in black attack us as soon as we sneak in the castle."

"… You like dangerous action, don't you?" Gourry said.

"It's an example. I don't mean to be found on purpose."

"I see. So, when we can't find out any clues of revolt in the castle, we will have a conclusion that the missing man is the wirepuller, right?" Gourry asked.

"There will be another conclusion." I replied. "The acting lord is very, very cautious. Anyway, it's time to go."

I took Gourry's hand and began to chant a Levitation spell.

It wasn't difficult for us to sneak into the castle. We went up to the sky by a Levitation, went over the wall, and landed on the roof of the main building of the castle. Then I checked a room from the skylight if there was someone in the room, opened the skylight of an empty room by an Unlock spell, and got into the building.

—We can make it easily so far, but I know that it will be hard for us from now on.

If the acting lord was the wirepuller, there might be some evidences of his evil devices, however, we didn't know where to investigate.

There were a few of guardians out of the building, there had to be the patrolling soldiers. Moreover, the important places had to be heavily guarded.

It was very difficult for us to find out the truth avoiding the

guardians.

... In the heroic saga, there is a pattern that the evil guys are talking about their evil deed and the sneaking hero can find out what is going on. I hope this easy pattern happens here, but it is rare... If it can't happen, then, what shall we do?

... We have to go where we can find out the truth...

I stood in the moonlight shone through the skylight, thinking hard.

"Alright." I said in a low voice. "I decide where to go."

"Where?" Gourry asked.

"To the room of the lord who is ill in bed somewhere in this castle."

"… Come on…" Gourry said in a complaining tone.

"There must be a heavy guard there, but we can hear the detailed story." I explained.

"Are you sure that the lord will talk us?" He seemed to be doubtful.

"I'm not sure, but the lord will talk what he knows when we tell our story well. I have a plan, so don't worry." I said.

"… A plan? … Then, okay, I'll go…" Gourry wasn't enthusiastic, but he didn't refuse any more.

We cautiously investigated the sounds and the signs outside of the room, and then we opened the door and went out of the room.

"… Hey, Lina. I think that we are going to go to the outskirts of this castle, don't we?" Gourry said in a low voice after we sneaked around the castle for a while. We were hiding ourselves in the dark narrow corridor.

After we got out of the room, we began to investigate here and there, but the soldiers on guard went round on patrol here and there.

It was natural for us to move on to the place where there were no soldiers, and finally, we arrive in the area that seemed to be abandoned. There wasn't a soldier standing at the door, neither a patrolling soldier who came and went the area. There were only a few lamps on the wall, and the corridor was almost filled with darkness.

"I… I think so. But there is no other way, you know!" I replied.

"How about letting those soldiers on patrol fall asleep with your magic spell?" Gourry said.

"How dare you say such a dangerous idea? It was you who complained that my plan was too dangerous." I replied. "It's easy for me to break my way through the patrolling soldiers letting them fall asleep by my spell. But after I move on, there will come another group of soldiers on patrol and they will find the sleeping comrades. The soldiers will alert all of the soldiers in the castle, and we will do nothing but run away. I can't stand such situation. It's a time wasting action."

"I see… But isn't it a time wasting action as well to go around the area where seems to be empty?" Gourry replied.

... Wow! It's a sharp refuter! How can be Gourry so sharp?

"I see… Then, we shall go ahead toward somewhere else." I said and both of us began to move again.

When we turn around and go back the way, the patrolling soldiers will find us. Then we shall go ahead on this safer way for awhile, and find another way to go…

We went through the dark corridor without purpose for some time.

"?"

Both of us, Gourry and I, stopped at the same time. Before us, we could see the corridor was ended in the shape of capital "T", and there were two corridors running toward right and left. We didn't stop because we saw the end of the corridor, but because we found a sign of some persons in the area ahead of the rightward corridor.

It was mysterious for us that the corridor was still dark. If there were some persons, they might put the light on the walls of the corridor, but there was no light.

The word "ambush" came in my brain, but I realized that they didn't hide their sign.

... Well, then?...

I thought hard in the darkness.

Some persons are there. Then there must be a reason for them to be there. It is impossible for other spies sneaking into the castle in the same night and standing there not hiding their sign. I can't

hear a talking voice, so this isn't a secret meeting. Then, what is going on there? Wow, I'm curious. Okay, let's go and see!

If we got closer carelessly, they could notice us, but there seemed that no soldiers on patrol come to the area. I knew that I could use the spell. I began to chant a spell in my mouth.

"Sleeping!" I cast the spell with a low voice.

Soon after that, we heard two moaning voice and the sound of something falling down on the floor in the place ahead of the rightward corridor.

—*Gotcha.*

I gave a sign to Gourry with my eyes, and we went ahead.

Turning around the corner, we found two soldiers sleeping on the floor. There was a small door just behind them.

The area seemed to be abandoned and the door seemed to be thin and old. It seemed that the room behind the door had to be a room for the junks. But it wasn't logical that two soldiers stood on guard for the junks.

"… What is this room?" Gourry asked.

"I don't know." I replied. "I don't know what they are guarding. If we want to know, then, enter the room."

I put my hand on the knob. The door wasn't locked, and with a squeaking noise, it opened.

I could smell the air of ill.

There was a lamp which shone a dim-light in the room. There was an old bed with a canopy. And there was an old man lying on the bed. He seemed to be dried and thin. He didn't wake up for our entering, and just breathed irregularly. I knew that such breathing sounds were made by those who were seriously weak.

...Why do they put this sick person in this room? Is he a case of infectious disease? No, if he were, there would be no soldiers on guard...

"Well?"

When I saw the color of the sick old man's face, an idea flashed in my head. I went closer to his bed. I felt the sick man's pulse, checked the condition of his skin, and leaned over his face to smell his breath.

"What are you doing, Lina? Are you investigating this old man?" Gourry asked.

"I found out that this old man is poisoned." I said.

"What?!" Gourry moaned. I explained him.

"His condition tells me that he has been poisoned constantly with small amount of the poison which affects the victims slowly.

—Now, we found a poisoned man who is left in a small room, and two soldiers stand guard over him. Those facts bring me a conclusion."

"What conclusion?" Gourry asked again.

"It is a guess. But I think that this old man is the lord who is said

to be ill in bed.” I said.

“Wait! Wait a minute!” Gourry was surprised. “If you are right, then what is going on here?”

“Only I can say is that the acting lord Laavas is telling a lie to us.” I said in a low voice.

If it was Baitham who had a plan of a revolt, there was no reason for Laavas to put a poison to the lord and to let the sick lord be shut up in a room in the abandoned area of the castle.

—But all of these conclusions are based on the assumption that this old is the lord Langmeyer. We need to confirm the assumption. The best way to do it is to ask the sick man.

I put my hand on the shoulders of the old man and shook him a little.

It was possible for him to cry for help when he woke up, but I had a plan to let him be silent. If he woke up, I would tell him that we were the spies of the king, who were investigating the rumors about a revolt. I would tell him that it would be no use to cry for help.

I know that it's a cheating, but when the princess of another kingdom was here, she would say 'when we work for the justice, there is no problem to get information by hook or by crook'.

But, I didn't need to tell him a lie. He didn't wake up even when I shook him again and again.

"Oh, it's no use…" I said. He wasn't asleep, but was in a coma.

"Then, what shall we do?" Gourry asked me.

"We shall leave him alone." I relied.

"I see. But then, where shall we go and what shall we investigate?" Gourry asked again.

"Well. Then, how about waking one of the sleeping soldiers up

and grilling him for the information?" I said. "We can cheat him to confess the truth, and when he says that this old man is the lord Langmeyer, the acting lord Laavas had taken over the lord's position and he is the wirepuller for the reinforcement of the army."

"I see. Good idea." Gourry said and he and I walk out of the room through the door.

"Who are you?" Someone said from far away in the corridor. It was a familiar voice for me.

What?

I turned around in haste and found that there stood Luke and Millina.

Why are they here?

The Flowers of Battle Bloom in the Night of Solaria

"Who are you? Freeze! Don't move!" Luke said and he drew his sword. Holding the sword in his hand, Luke ran toward us.

No way!

By reflex action, Gourry and I began to run toward the opposite direction of Luke.

"Stop! Guys!" Luke shouted as he was chasing.

It's natural to run away from the man who holds a drawn sword!

But it was true that Gourry and I were suspicious. We covered our faces with a mask. We changed our clothes, and we had the swords even though we didn't put on armor.

There were two soldiers lying on the floor. There were two suspicious guys stood near the lying soldiers. Nobody couldn't blame Luke for his drawing the sword.

Anyway, we have to make up our mind. To run away from the castle immediately, or to reveal ourselves to Luke and try to persuade him.

—Okay, run away.

Soon I made up my mind.

Luke kept shouting at us as he was chasing us. Then other

soldiers would come to this area. There was little time for us to explain our story to Luke and Millina before other soldiers would find us.

Tonight, I run away. Tomorrow, I'll meet Luke and Millina by some means or other and I'll explain them our story. Good idea. Now, how we escape from here?

I chanted a spell in my mouth.

"Dam Blass!!" I turned around quickly and cast a spell.

Booom!

My spell impacted on the ceiling over the corridor just middle of Luke and me. It broke the ceiling and the roof.

"Wow!" Luke cried out and stepped back a few steps to dodge the falling rubbles.

I chanted another spell and took a hand of Gourry.

"Laywing!" I flew through the hole on the ceiling with Gourry, went above the roof, and landed on the roof. This flying spell had one problem. The total sum of its speed, the flying height, and the weight of all luggages was proportional to the whole amount the magical power of the magic user. When I carried Gourry, it was impossible for me to fly away immediately. It was my best to fly up to the roof of the building. When I used a boosted Laywing, it was possible to fly away at a flight, but there had been no time to chant a boosting spell.

Therefore, landing on the roof, I canceled my spell, and then I began to chant a boosting spell.

—Four kings who rule the darkness of four universes;
I implore you on your fragments I have;
That by all the power you possess;
Give me more magical energy—

Reacting to this simple spell, four talismans, the Demon Bloods, glittered at my neck, wrists and on the buckle of my waist belt. My body was filled with the power of magic. Then I began to chant a Laywing again.

"Freeze!" Before I completed my spell, Luke and Millina came up to the roof. Perhaps, they used a Levitation or something.

—Oh, no! They are so persistent!

Luke ran on the roof toward us, and just before he came to our place, I completed my spell!

"Laywing!"

I flew up to the sky with Gourry at much faster speed than before.

Okay, we'll fly away at one flight—

"Lina! They are chasing us!" Gourry shouted.

"What?" I was so surprised. "No way! How can Luke and Millina catch up with me like the men in black who did two days earlier?"

"Probably, this spell isn't much fast." Gourry said.

"Yes, it is! An ordinary sorcerer can't use a Laywing at this speed! It's impossible!"

“But they are actually catching up with us… Oh, I understand!” Gourry said.

“What?”

“Last night, your spell was useless for the man in black, and tonight, your flying spell isn’t so fast. So, it’s the day in a month for you!”

“Noooooooo!” I cried out.

But Gourry was reasonable. Within those three days, I couldn’t run away at the situation I could have run away, and I couldn’t knock down an enemy in the scene I could have knocked down the enemy. Did my magical power disappear? No. The speed of Laywing was usual, and the power of Dam Blass which broke the ceiling was usual. The fact was that the chasers were fast and the enemy was strong.

When an ordinary sorcerer used an ordinary Laywing, it was impossible for him to catch up with my boosted Laywing, but when the sorcerer was skilled enough to arrange several spells to make his Laywing fast or to strengthen his Laywing, his catching up with me might be possible. Probably, Luke and Millina could use some more spells and skills than what they had used before my eyes.

Okay, I’ll ask them later. But now, let’s explain them our story.

I landed on the ground near one of city’s walls in the empty area far away from the castle, and I canceled the spell.

Soon after, Luke and Millina landed on the ground nearby us. While they had flown, I saw that Luke pulled a hand of Millina. I

guessed that both of them could use Laywing spell and they used it at the same time. The same spell used by two magic users resonated each other and made the speed of the spell faster, I guessed.

—It's not the matter to think first. Now, stop them to attack us.

But before I called for Luke and Millina, Luke created a ball of magical power on the palm of his stretched right hand.

—Too aggressive he is!

"Ready for your death!" Luke shouted and cast the magical ball at us! The glittering ball of magical power divided into plenty of small bullets of light, and poured over Gourry and me!

"No, no, nooooo!"

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Gourry and I jumped away from the places where we had stood, and all of the bullets of light impacted on the empty ground. I knew that the power of one bullet wasn't strong, but there was no need for us to receive them.

"Freeze!" Luke shouted again.

"Wait! A moment, please!" I shouted back. I turned toward Luke and took off the cloth from my face. "It's me! Me and Gourry!"

"What?" Luke stopped with a look of surprise. But Millina had no feelings on her face as usual even when she watched our revealed faces.

Or has she already known that the spies were us?

“You—” Luke said in a surprised tone. It was plain that Luke didn’t expect the true character of the spies.

“You finally made up your mind to be wrong, didn’t you?” He said such insulting words.

“No way! How dare you think in that way?” I complained.

“I won’t hear you anymore! Ready for this!” Luke created a ball of magical power on his palm again—

“It’s better for you to hear their story.” A familiar voice interrupted.

“What!” Luke shouted and erased the ball of magical power. He looked around carefully and then he stared at a place. I looked at the direction to which Luke watched. There was a shadow stood quietly on the top of the roof near the castle.

—Wow! That’s him! The masked man!

“You, black-haired guy. Do you attack those people on purpose of Laavas’ evil plan?” The man on the roof asked Luke. And Luke was embarrassed by his question.

“What’s Laavas’ evil plan? What do you mean?” He shouted.

“He means to say that Laavas is on the side of those men in black whom we fought in Bezeldo!” This was my turn to interrupt others.

“Are you sure?” Luke asked.

“No! Therefore, I sneaked into the castle and investigated!” I answered.

“Let me say.” The masked man said. “Laavas’ plan is more than a simple increasing of the city’s military strength.” Talking, he glanced around the place. “But, it’s not the time to explain.”

At that time, there appeared the enemies surrounding us.

—I see. There are other chasers than Luke and Millina…

It was just like the shadows by the moonlight took forms themselves and stood up to their feet. They were the men in black whom I knew well. I could see more than ten of them.

“Be careful.” The masked man looked around carefully and said. “Some of those men are the chimeras of a human and a demon.”

… What?

I couldn’t believe my ears and looked up at the masked man. But it wasn’t only me who were surprised by his words.

“Who are you? … What do you know about?” One of the men in black asked in a hurry and it proved that the masked man was right.

Oh, I got it! It explains well why Zain became much stronger in a short while, and why I was followed when I used a boosted Ray-wing. One chimera of a human and a demon can do easily!

But when the masked man was right, it meant that we were confronted with very powerful enemies. I remembered that one of them cast an offensive spell suddenly. I thought that he had chanted the spell without my notice, but it was possible that the man cast a spell without chanting incantation. I also remembered that another man in black received my offensive spell with his bare hand. I thought that he used a defective spell but when he was a chimera of a

demon, most of shamanistic spells were useless for him.

“Arrest the masked man alive.” One of the enemies said. “And kill the others.”

One of the men in black said, and responding to these orders, other enemies moved.

One killer jumped on the wall and created a lance of light in his hand. He cast it to the masked man on the roof!

But the masked man kept quite cool, and reached out his right hand and said.

“Vas Grood”

With the spell, he created a small magical shield, just as if he had known that the enemy attacked with a lance of light.

Kwink!

The lance of light impacted on the magical shield and vanished away.

“What?”

The enemy on the wall was surprised and froze there. One second’s carelessness invite you a critical damage! I completed the incantation at that time and cast the spell at him!

“Blast Ash!”

Zahhh!

The darkness enveloped the man in black on the wall and changed his body into the dust. The enemy vanished without a cry.

“Don’t underestimate them!”

One of other men in black said. I remembered that the voice was Zain’s!

“You’ll be my first pray! Lina Inverse!” One of the enemies came running toward me. It had to be Zain himself!

It’s you who underestimate my quick tongue!

Whan I completed my spell, I was still out of reach of Zain’s sword.

“Blast Ash!”

I supposed Zain’s running course, and cast my spell on it. I knew that the more I used the same spell the less effective my attack would be. But the enemy was fast and had a resisting power against the black magic. There were a few spells that I could use in fighting such a powerful enemy. My choice was a Blast Ash or a Dragon Slave. But I knew it well how it would be dangerous and troublesome for me to use a Dragon Slave in a town.

A Blast Ash created a dark thing and it enveloped the space around the target. When I vanished, the trapped enemy would became dust and vanished, too.

I saw the space around Zain was enveloped by the darkness, and what I saw after the darkness was gone—was an empty space!

What?

“Lina!” Gourry shouted and at the same time, a chilling feeling ran down on my back. Without thinking, I jumped forward.

Shook!

Something grazed my back.

I ran away from the enemy in my back and turned around. There stood a man in black holding his sword in his hands. I realized that the enemy stood just in the area surrounded by Gourry, Luke, Millina and me! This man couldn't be an ambush!

—Oh, it means that…

"Hey, hey! He came out from the air!" Luke shouted and his words gave me the evidence for my guess.

"Is that your ability, Zain?" I asked.

"Yes, it is." He answered calmly.

—I knew it well…

Zain used the darkness of my Blast Ash to hide himself and moved to the area just behind me. He had turned around and attacked my with his sword. It was his way to move which wasn't natural—he warped through the space!

It made sense that he had used the same ability while he had fought us the night before.

I knew that a Mazoku with certain power used the same ability. The masked man said that some of those men in black were the chimeras of a human and a demon. But it was too difficult for a chimera to warp through the space with its physical body. Probably, the chimera had both a great magical power as a demon and skill of magic as a human, and the combination of the power and skill made

it possible for Zain to use the ability…

Oh, no! The enemies are too hard to beat down.

I had managed to escape from Zain's first blow which grazed my cloak, but I couldn't imagine that I would do the same. Moreover, the masked man suggested that Zain wasn't only one chimera. There must have been some more enemies who could use the same skill.

Furthermore, the number of our enemy was more than twice of us plus the masked man on the roof. I supposed that the half of the enemies were normal humans, but their black clothes prevented me from telling the chimeras from the humans.

Oh, my… This battle will be hard for us….

While I and my friends embarrassed with Zain's ability, the other men in black came closer to us.

In order to break through the enemies, we, five fighters must do a good teamwork…

I thought but at that time, the masked man on the roof suddenly jumped down on the wall, and he jumped down on the ground on the other side. He ran away into another block in the city.

Nooooo! Are you escaping from the enemy alone?

But I wasn't only person who were surprised by the escape of the masked man.

"What?" Zain cried out and froze a second.

"Raza Clover!" Millina cast an offensive spell at Zain, but he jumped aside and dodged it easily.

“Four of the members follow the masked man! The others will kill those four spies!” Zain ordered, and several of them ran away into the city.

—I see. The masked man seems to know some secret of those men in black. Therefore he is the more important target for our enemies. The masked man ran away from the battle and forced the enemies to split the group.

However, the enemies outnumbered us, and the situation was hard for us.

Zain remained before us, and he dashed toward me again.

Krank!

The silver blade knocked on another silver blade. The clear sharp noise echoed in the night.

Gourry interrupted between Zain and I, swinging his sword, and Zain received Gourry’s sword with his sword. That was the beginning of a severe sword battle between them. It seemed that both of them wanted to settle the unfinished battle in the night before.

I was safe from Zain, but the other men in black rushed to me and Gourry. I drew my sword and held it at one of the coming enemy. In addition, I had begun to chant a spell.

Krank!

One man in black came running to me and gave me a blow. When I received it with my sword, I completed my spell.

“Freeze Arrow!”

Responding to my words with power, dozens of arrows of ice appeared in the space before me! Usually this spell produces only a dozen of arrow of ice, but the boosting spell that I had chanted previously increased the number of the arrow.

“What?”

The man in black before me was so surprised to stop his blow and he jumped back from me.

“Go!” I shouted and the arrows of ice flew to the group of the men in black.

Zipping through the air, the arrows of ice left countless glitter in the empty pace.

It was like the rain of ice and they were hard for anyone to dodge perfectly.

“Gaa!”

“Gwa!”

Left cries for surprise or agony, two of men in black fell down on the ground.

I knew well that a Freeze Arrow couldn’t damage any chimera of a demon and a human. But I also knew that more than half of those men in black were ordinary humans. I expected to knock out those normal enemies and my tactics seemed to succeed!

I began to chant another spell—

Krank! Kan!

I heard the sharp metallic noise just behind me. I didn't when Millina stood behind me, but she stood there back to back with me, and she held her sword in her hand.

Over there were two men in black!

I supposed that those enemies threw knives or something at me and Millina knocked down the flying weapons with her sword.

The two men in black held their right hands as if they were going to throw something—

“I hate your poor tactics!” Luke shouted at them and swung his long sword.

Zip!

The magical power of the sword created a gust of wind and let the enemies totter.

At that time, Millina cast a spell. “Fehlzareid!”

A whirl of magical light knocked one of the two men in black!

Hmmm, it’s a beautiful teamwork, isn’t it?

Seeing that several their men had been defeated in a short while, some enemies hesitated to attack us. However, there still were some enemies who still wanted to fight against us. I couldn’t see if they were reckless or they were confident of their having abilities of the demon.

The number of the men in black had gotten fewer, but the number of the lethal enemy was same.

Okay, then. What will you do for this?

“Fireball!” I cast my spell over my head! Usually a fireball exploded when it impacted on something, but I used a trick for this spell.

“Break!” I snapped my fingers.

Booowm!

Far over us, my fireball exploded with a roaring noise, and red light shone in the night sky.

I remembered the words of the masked man. Two nights before, he said to the enemies “if we’ll fight here on a large scale, people will know soon”, and the enemies retreated without hesitation. I expected that my fireball would let the people know our fighting, and the men in black would retreat again.

“Hey! What are you doing? It’s a serious fight!” Luke complained without knowing my plan.

But, I could see that the enemies got restless with the situation—except one man.

“Kyushaaaaa!”

That man was filled with the air of fight and slash at Millina with a beast-like roar. His attack seemed to be that of a berserker, and it was fast and severe.

Millina managed to receive those blows with her sword, and went backward gradually.

“Bastard! What are you doing to my Millina!” Luke shouted his selfish opinion in the confusion of the fight, and tried to support her.

“I’m not yours.” Millina gave an objection calmly even though she was fighting with enemy.

Of course, I began to chant another spell in that confusion.

I wanted to support Gourry or Millina with my spell, but both of

them were fighting against the enemies and it was very difficult for me to cast a spell. My spell could damage Gourry or Millina together with the enemies.

Okay, I'll use this spell to other enemies.

I got ready to cast my spell—

"What?"

A surprised voice came from the end of the street. We could see a middle-aged man stood there. Probably, he had noticed the explosion of my spell and had come to see what was going on.

"!!"

Zain got restless, and jumped far backward to the area out of Gourry's reach.

Yes! Things are going as I expected! When other people will come, those men in black will go away!

—But

The enemy who was fighting against Millina didn't act like Zain.

He jumped from Millina just like Zain did, but he didn't mean to run away.

"Don't disturb us." He said to the middle-aged man roughly, and swung his left hand.

"Gaa!"

The middle-aged man gave a cry of death and fell on the ground.

—*What?*

“What are you doing, Zord!” Zain blamed him.

“I only killed the eyewitness!” Zord said pleasantly. “Let’s kill all of those who will disturb our killing each other!”

“Are you sure? People already know our fighting, and more of them soon come here!”

“The more they come, the more we kill! That’s all!” Zord swung his left hand again.

—Am I the target?

Feeling the air of kill, I jumper aside without thinking. But an invisible blade cut a lock of my hair.

—Damn! You cut my beautiful hair!

But the situation got much severer. I could see that Zord used the same attack at me and the middle-aged man. I thought that it had been a thrown knife or something, but nothing I could see. There was no light or shadow of a blade, and my hair was cut.—It had to be an invisible shockwave.

Probably, Zord could create an invisible shockwave in the size of a small knife with a swing of his left hand and threw it at his target.

What a dangerous skill!

In order to dodge his attack, we had to keep our eyes on him and when he showed the motion to create an invisible shockwave, we would jumo aside. That was what only we could do.

But, it was impossible for us to keep our eyes on Zord, because

there were other men in black.

Then, only I have to do it to knock him down! My spell is Blast Ash because the chimeras may have ability to dodge usual spells. Millina! Please don't be in the spell's area!

"Blast Ash!"

I aimed at the space just behind him. Zord seemed to feel something and he ran forward. Luke dashed toward Zord.

Zank!

One blow of Luke's sword ripped Zord's rib.

Yes! We did!

I was delighted, but it was only a few second. Even though his rib was deeply cut, Zord gave another fast and severe blow at Luke!

"What?"

Krank!

Luke managed to receive the blow with his long sword.

"What are you?" Luke asked.

"Hahahaha! It's useless! Your blow can't kill me at all!" Zord was delighted.

What? How tough he is! We must kill him now or he'll be a hard enemy!

But before we reacted, Zain ordered his fellows.

"Retreat!"

All other men in black ran away from the battle field. Zord remained there.

“Zord!” Zain shouted.

“Reteat and leave me here! I want to fight against them! I want to kill them all!” Zord said insanely.

... Don’t give such a dangerous ability to such a twist-minded man... Or, did assimilation with demon gave him such a insane mind?

“I’ll tell your selfish act to the lord. Can you imagine how he will think of you?”

I thought that Zain’s threatening was old-fashined, but Zord got restless that time. Soon he jumped far away from Luke and said. “… I was wrong! I’ll go with you.”

Wow, how obedient he becomes?

“Retreat.”

Again, Zain ordered all of his man, and they ran away into the darkess of the night.

After Zain left, there were only four of us and several people came toward the street.

“—Now it’s time to go for us,” I said.

“I agree with you. Let’s go.” Millina nodded.

“Okay, let’s go to the place where we can settle down to talk.” I said.

"… Now I see… I fully understand." Luke whispered in an unpleasant tone.

It was just after I finished my explanation about the happenings. He was listening to me with a glass of liquor in his hand.

After we fought against a group of the men in black, Gourry and I went back to the inn to get back our luggage. Then Luke, Millina, Gourry and I left the block in the center of the city and moved to another block on the edge of the city. There they were developing the area and we could see that they were building the houses, inns, stores… one after another, and such an unplanned development put the block in a mess. As we expected, there area was dangerous and we could see the rowdy guys and mysterious guys pass by.

That was the reason why we decided to settle down in the block. We found an inn and bar which seemed to be rather lonesome for its not being old, and we ate our late supper there.

"According to your story, I get the conclusion that Laavas is on the side of those men in black. Am I right?" Luke asked me.

"Yes, you are right." I answered and picked up one piece of sandwich of the smoked salmon.

"Shit! … I can't believe that Millina and I were deceived by the man!" Luke hissed angrily, but Millina said in a calm tone. "I wasn't deceived. It's you who was deceived simply."

"What?" Luke was very surprised. "Do you mean that you didn't trust Laavas at all?"

"As I said to you before, I dislike the red headed men." Millina

said.

"… But… I think that it is your prejudice…" Luke seemed depressed a little.

"Excuse me," I interrupted them. "I hear that it was you, Millina, who accepted the job of guarding Laavas. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is. There is a story to tell." Millina began her story in the usual calm voice.

One night some weeks before—

At that time, Millina and Luke stayed in another city a little bit away from Solaria. She was disgusted with Luke's begging for her love, and she went out to the town hoping to be alone. And she met with a man.

The man told her. "I served lord Langmeyer of Solaria city. Frankly speaking, one evil guy is trying to take the position of the lord now, and he has a plan to kill all of the lord's family. I'm going to bring the news to the king and I want you to guard me from the enemy."

Millina refused his proposal. Luke said that he disliked the job of guardian because the job wasn't exciting. But Millina's reason was different from Luke's. She thought that the man was a liar.

It was natural for everyone not to trust the man. How dare an honest man told the story about the lord's position to a stranger? Usually such a serious story would be revealed after Millina would accept the job of guardian. So, Millina supposed that the man told lies to her hoping to use her.

On the day after.

Millina found the dead body of the man on the street. It was the time for her to have a suspect. She suspected that he wasn't a liar. She imagined the thought of a man who was in danger of his life. He desperately hoped to find someone to help him and his cornered mind let him the secret to a stranger. He might also hope to let someone know the truth before he would be killed.

She wanted to if she was right or not, therefore she came to Solaria city.

"… I see," Gourry said to Millina. "It is surprising for me that Laavas hire both of you even though he is on the side of the men in black in Bezeldo."

"I think that he has a policy to use anything he can use." Millina held a cup of herb tea with a spoon of brandy. "I wished to stay in the castle several days more and seek for the evidences. But there is nothing for it."

"Do you mean that you were seeking the evidences when you and I met in the castle?" I asked her and she answered with a nod. "In the room where we sneaked—there was an old man sleeping in the bed. He was poisoned." I said.

Millina reacted with a slight move of her eyebrows.

"I imagine that the old man is lord Langmeyer." I said.

"Then, that is the evidence for the dead man's story." Gourry said with a serious look. "Laavas is trying to take the position of the lord. However, what is Laavas?"

“Laavas is our enemy. That’s all we know.” Luke said. “I have another question. What is the masked man? Who is he?”

“… I think that the masked man isn’t our enemy.” I replied.

“I can’t trust him.” Luke explained. “He can be the king’s spy. He uses us because it is good for him to cause trouble for Laavas. If it’s true, he can’t be on our side in the serious battle. Here is another idea. The masked man can be a man of Baitham who fled from the castle. Baitham is alive somewhere and want to come back. This story tells us well why the man knows many secrets about the enemy. Again, if this is true, Baitham and the masked man will use us as they hope, and it’s natural for them to hope us to be dead after they’ll take the position back.”

“Then… we can’t expect the masked man to help us,” I relied.

“The easiest way is… “ Luke scratched his head and glanced at Millina. “To leave this city, tell the news to the king or someone with the power, and let him care the things.”

“If you want to do, just go to the king alone.” Millina said.

“On, no, Millina! Don’t be cruel to me!” Luke cried and begged her.

“Lina? What will we do?” Gourry asked me with a wry smile, and I could see that he already knew my answer.

“Of course! I’ll knock down those who start a battle against me! The villains? The lord? I don’t care!”

“Then we’ll go together.” Millina said calmly.

Luke seemed to change his mind and wryly smiled. “Then stay here until the public excitement over our fight dies down, and rush the castle.”

“How dare you have such a peaceful plan,” I swallowed down the last piece of my sandwiches. “Let’s go right now!”

The night in Solaria was unusually busy. Given the disturbances which had been going on for almost two days, the noisy town seemed natural.

Many onlookers gathered at the place where we had fought. The guards were busy keeping them at bay while they conducted their investigation of the scene.

We saw them while flying through the night sky.

Our destination was the same shrine that Gourry and I had previously sneaked into. The situation was not entirely the same though, since it wasn’t just the two of us—and most importantly, this time we came looking for a fight, not for clues.

There was a chance that there would be some important facilities in the basement of this castle, like equipment for creating mazoku-human chimeras like Zord and Zain.

Our purpose: *Destroy them completely.*

Of course, we had thought earlier about just invading the castle, tying up Laavas, making him confess everything and bringing down the bad guy for good.

To tell the truth, I was the one who suggested that plan, but Millina protested against it. As far as we knew, Laavas certainly was

the most suspicious one, but we didn't have hard evidence against him, either. Millina said that we could not go through with this as long as there was a chance that Laavas was not the real mastermind.

Millina also blew me off coldly when I mentioned that if Laavas turned out to be innocent, we could just say "Oh, sorry, my mistake!≡ Hohoho!"

So that was why we chose to target the facilities of this castle instead. Regardless of whether Laavas was harboring any dark secrets, it was clear that the place was an important base for the masked men in black.

We could kill two birds with one stone by weakening the enemy's power while also getting some clues about the revolt. What was more, the place could be empty right now because the men in black—Zain included—could have left the premises to report to their 'boss'. Because our fight took place right before, they wouldn't expect us to attack right now, so the timing was great to catch them with their guard down. All in all, it was a really good chance for us.

"There it is," I murmured quietly from inside the wind barrier.

There was the shrine building, which had a dome-shaped roof. Directing my spell, I steered us towards it.

Though the darkness of the night and the swirling wind from the barrier surrounding us made it hard to count the number of guards, I could make out that there were fewer of them than last time.

The four of us touched down on the roof.

"Millina. Cast another barrier of wind to surround us."

“What for?”

“Noise.”

It seemed like she caught my drift from that one word. Chanting, she created a wind barrier around us.

And then..

“Dam Brass!”

Kwaaang!

The destructive force of my magic made the roof collapse inwards. The thundering sound was all but erased by the barrier of wind surrounding us. We headed inside the building through the hole using Levitation. Just like before, we could only see darkness; but this time, it wasn’t a problem if we went about the whole thing a bit more violently.

When I was about to chant a spell to create light in front of us, however—

—suddenly we heard a big commotion.

“What happened?”

“You! Don’t move!”

The door which led out of the room swung open, and a bunch of guards began rushing through it, shouting.

“H… How did they find us?! Even though we muted all the noise?”

“They heard a pile of rocks falling down in here, maybe?” Luke

answered sarcastically to my embarrassed yell of a question.

Damn… So that was it…

The barrier could only erase the sounds directed outside, beyond the roof, but it might not have been able to muffle the noise of the roof collapsing into the building.

It might've been a really loud crash…

Hmph-hmph! It's useless to regret past events now!

I chanted a spell quickly and fired it at the soldiers who were advancing on us with long steps, turning the the arranged chairs to the side.

"Sleeping!"

Thump-thump! The soldiers fell down on the floor one after another, like a row of dominoes.

I figured there were no human magicians like Zain and Zord among them, because they succumbed to deep sleep easily. Even more soldiers dashed into the room, but the spells Millina and I cast put them to sleep too, and the few who escaped our spells were knocked down by attacks from Gourry and Luke.

In the end, only the unconscious bodies of the soldiers remained around us, lined up in a neat row.

Last time, there had also been two of the masked men in black around, but they weren't here this time. I could only guess it might have had something to do with the timing of our invasion, but there might have been some other reason we didn't know about. Like, for

instance, that they had made preparations for our attack just now, somewhere down in the basement.

Anyhow, I chanted my spell again.

“Lighting!”

The light flared to life. I threw it toward the ceiling, where it remained floating in the air and illuminated the interior of the building.

There were chairs lined up in rows with an aisle running through the center of them, and there was a huge altar set up in front of a statue of a god.

It looked pretty good to be used as a real chapel. Even looking at it up close, I would never have guessed it was a fake one if there hadn’t been for those guards.

Maybe there was a secret door somewhere, but I didn’t want to waste energy uselessly by trying to find it.

“Dam Brass!”

—*Booom*!

I struck with my amplified spell into the aisle floor!

But it revealed nothing but empty ground, surrounded with ripped-up pieces of the floor.

“Damn. Not here.”

I just hoped that my spell could open a way towards the hidden facilities below. I chanted another one right away.

“Hey… you’re not planning to blow up everything here with magic until you find the right place, are you?” Gourry asked with a pale face.

Of course I wouldn’t do such a silly thing.

I slammed my hand down on the ripped-up floor.

“Bephis Bring!”

With my tunnel-digging magic, I created a long, narrow passage into the ground.

I figured that we could find exactly where the hidden facilities were by using that spell a few more times, if I aimed carefully.

But there was no need to cast Bephis Bring twice like that, it turned out.

“Gotcha.”

At the end of the tunnel I had just dug right in front of us, a thin ray of light was shining through. As I suspected, those facilities were hidden much deeper in the place.

So after widening the tunnel with the spell again —

W-Wait a second.

Just before I rushed into the hole as quickly as possible using Levitation, I changed my mind and cast another spell instead…

…into the tunnel.

“Fireball!”

Boooom!

Paying attention to the withdrawing flame, Luke and Millina descended into the hole using the Levitation spell. Gourry and I followed them using Levitation, too.

There was nothing there except for a straight corridor. Parts of the wall were blackened by my fireball.

I casted that spell because of the sudden feeling that we might be walking into an ambush, but no one was here. On the other hand, I could have just invited more enemies with the sound of the explosion…

Anyway, in this narrow place, it could give us a hard time if enemies started pouring in with swords drawn. So it was better to move somewhere else as quickly as possible.

I chanted a spell again.

"Dam Brass!"

— Boooom!

By guess, I blew out one side of the wall.

I have surprisingly good guessing skills!

There was a pretty huge place beyond the hole in the wall.

As we dashed in there, not checking what was inside beforehand..

"Ah…. Ah…?"

Inside the huge room, there were five men wearing the clothes of a sorcerer. Their faces were full of fear, and they were staring us

with wide eyes. They did not look like the type of magicians who blow up stuff here and there. They seemed more like simple researchers.

But it was not only the sorcerers that were there.

In the room, there were a number of crystal tubes used in the creation of chimeras. And in the tubes filled with life-sustaining liquid—

This might have been among the "fruits" of the mazoku-chimera research. A man with a half-human, half-lesser demon body was floating in a tube. There was also a woman whose neck was transformed into an abnormal form, and a child possessing a distorted body.

It was beyond doubt that they—these people, who were human once—did not become materials for this experiment by their own free will.

"YOU BASTARD!" With a sudden cry, Luke seized one o nearest mages by the scruff of his neck.

“Uh…uhhhhhh!”

A sorcerer, who was close to the door opposite to us, hastily stretched his arm towards the knob.

A metallic sound pierced the room. A knife could be seen embedded into his back, thrown by Luke.

“Aagh!” The sorcerer’s body collapsed weakly to the floor.

“Don’t move, if you don’t want to end up like him.” The magicians were frozen as they felt the seriousness in Luke’s voice. “Tell everything you know. If you don’t, I will break all of your fingers one by one. If you still refuse, I will kill you and ask another person.”

His eyes were smouldering with anger. If we let him do what he wants, he would carry out his threats—but none of us could think of volunteering to stop Luke, after seeing what were in those crystal tubes.

“I…I’ll tell! I’ll tell you everything I know!” Recognizing that silence was useless, or just losing his nerve, the mage in Luke’s grasp shouted suddenly. “We… We were forced to conduct experiments here! They were about melding a summoned mazoku with a human!”

What!??

I could feel a kind of a weight descend upon me, hearing the magician’s words.

“The experiments involved seeing what would happen to a child if he, with his unestablished ego, would be subjected to the spirit; or

what effects would it have on a mature man or woman, how their talents, aptitude, appearance would change…"

"I don't care about the details of this blasted experiment," Luke silenced the mage; his words were quiet, but full of fury. "Who ordered you to do this?!"

The magician hesitated a little on the question before answering,

"L…Lord Laavas ordered us.."

So, it's just as we thought…

"Of course… So, you sons of bitches did these damn human experiments only to obey Lord Laavas, right?"

"Tha…That was an order! It… It was not my fault!"

Hugh…

Luke's expression turned positively dangerous as he listened to the unapologetic mage's confession.

"So, the girl floating there volunteered by herself? It's not your fault if it was an order from someone? Then I guess if someone ordered *me* to kill *you*, that wouldn't be my fault either."

"Ah…!"

Following the dull sound of impact, the magician shivered quietly.

Me and Gourry gasped at the same time. Where the heck did he hide that?

In a blink, Luke violently stabbed the mage's chest with a dagger

he seized with his other hand. When he loosened his grip on the magician's collar, his body flopped down to the ground weakly.

"That was too much, Luke."

"What are you talking about, Millina? You already saw what they did!" Luke repelled her quiet attempt at persuasion in an aggressive tone, very unlike the way he usually spoke to her. "They simply thought they were not at fault at all, just because they were ordered to! I can't just let these bastards—!"

"We have another one to take care of first, don't we?"

Listening to Millina, Luke clenched his teeth with a jarring sound.

"When I witness a scene like this, I just feel sick of humans…"

"I'm a human. And so are you."

His tense shoulders relaxed a little after hearing Millina's words.

"S…So… then… what about these…" As Luke glanced towards the sorcerers, they hunched together, full of fear.

But then…

"Sleeping!"

They fell asleep thanks to the spell I chanted quickly.

"How about leaving them here like this?" I suggested.

"Hmmh…" Luke answered with an embittered laugh. Although his anger had not died down yet, he would not try to kill people who were sleeping.

“So, now that we decided who’s the bad guy we need to defeat, let’s sneak into the castle and get rid of Laavas immediately! After that, there would be enough time to think of what to do with these guys.”

“Well… There’s one more thing we have to deal with before walking out of this place,” Gourry told us while watching the hole I had made into the wall.

“Enemies?”

“Yep. They’re already here.” Eyeing the side of the passage, he drew his sword. “It looks like they were hiding both in the literal sense and also tried to mask their presence; the room is already surrounded.”

“How could you know about that?” Luke cast a doubtful look towards Gourry.

I guess it would have been strange to tell him to trust someone’s intuition, but Gourry’s wild instincts had never failed since I’ve met him.

So, as the room was surrounded already, the strategy we have to take is… Oh, I got it!

I chanted my spell immediately.

“Alright. Let’s do this quickly! I’m fed up with all of this anyway!” Luke shouted, cheering himself up as he went to the side of door and pulled out his dagger which was stuck in the mage’s back.

At that moment—

—Bang!

With a great explosion, the door was blown off its hinges and flew inside the room. Maybe someone from the outside cast a spell like ‘Dam Brass’ at it.

Just as I thought!

In the same moment, I created a shield of wind around the door frame. We could hear the roar of the wind as the shield pulsed, its outer layer becoming tinted with burning crimson from the Fireball sent by our enemies.

They probably tried to get rid of us all at once by breaking down the door and throwing a ball of fire inside in quick succession. Of course that also meant that they wanted to kill the mages who were supposedly on their side as well.

If we tried to escape by running out to the corridor through the hole in the wall, the men who were waiting for us there would strike at us with their swords. The reason why they didn’t attack us immediately was likely that they were trying to set up a blockade.

But what they did not count on was Gourry’s sharp intuition!

At that moment, the flame withdrew from the door frame, I dispelled the shield of wind from around us—and with quick steps, Gourry dashed towards the door!

Nodding to each other, Luke and Millina started running after him. I was going to follow them too, but at that moment, I was struck by an idea and added a few little tricks to the room first.

Following the others, I came to a chamber much wider than the

last one. Like before, this place was filled with suspicious devices, the function of which I couldn't tell, and also some crystal tubes we had seen earlier, arranged irregularly.

There were around ten masked men in black in the room.

Either because they thought they had managed to deal with us and got caught by surprise, or just because they were that incompetent, two of the masked men were already down for the count on the floor.

Just as another one of them got pushed back after clashing swords with Gourry… all of a sudden, yet another masked man dashed forward from behind an empty crystal tube, attacking Gourry with his weapon from the side!

That won't be as easy as you think!

After pushing the opponent he was engaging with his sword away, Gourry took a step back and spun around his left foot; using this momentum, the circular strike of his sword penetrated the man's defences and struck his stomach. As his opponent staggered back, Gourry kicked him towards his fellow, the one who tried to ambush him. Surprised, the other masked man was pushed off balance by his stumbling comrade—and in that moment, Gourry sliced both of them at once!

While he was fighting, and a combination attack from Luke and Millina just managed to knock down another masked man, I managed to complete my spell.

"Gaaah—-!!"

The sound of collapsing rock came from behind, accompanied by cries of shock.

Heh, heh. They took my bait.

“Fireball!”

I launched my spell towards the masked men in black who were caught in the collapsing floor-trap I set up at the hole in the wall in the previous room.

—-Boom!!

Naturally, they had no way of evading it. Directly hit by my spell, the masked men in black were blasted away in all directions.

That was the trap I had set a moment ago. I thought that the men who were waiting in the corridor would try to get here through the hole, so I dug a tunnel with Bephis Bring right under it. Only a very thin layer of rock remained under the floor, which collapsed immediately once someone stepped on it.

The masked men in black waiting in corridor might have ran in because they were confused that the fight was already underway, even though the Fireball thrown by their fellows failed to detonate in here.

Still, I only managed to catch a few; more enemies were bound to appear through the hole soon.

Okay, then I’ll handle this room, and leave the men in black in the second room to the others! It was a relief that there were no half-mazoku chimeras around this time, but they could still suddenly run us down from that direction.

Therefore, we needed to decrease the number of enemies right now.

“Blast Ash!”

Following a grayish flash, my spell turned five masked men into dust at once.

Wouldn’t this be a great opportunity for the enemy to throw a Fireball into the room?

In that case…

I started chanting a spell.

Before I finished, one of the masked men in black showed up at the hole in the wall—and in his hand, there was an orange-colored ball of light.

As I suspected… Man, good thing I’m already prepared for it!

“Fireball!”

“Diem Wind!”

We shot the two spells almost at the same time.

Once it collided with my spell, the Fireball exploded immediately with a burst of flame, but it did not have enough power to overwhelm the air currents of the Diem Wind. The man in black probably did not expect this, but the flames began to turn upon him. He seemed to notice what was happening, but could not move away, because the Diem Wind kept *him* at bay as well.

In the end…

Booooooom!!

…the masked man in black was burnt to crisp by his own Fireball.

Alright! After this attack, the men standing in the corridor will think twice before rushing in like that!

So to take advantage of the delay…

I tried to chant my next spell, but at that moment, a dangerous presence appeared not far from me!

Suddenly, a shadow took form at the center of the room!

To warp space like that, that means…

“Zain?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting for so long.”

Human and mazoku.

The black form of the man who possessed the skills of both species was towering right in front of me.

The Ambitions of the Dissolved Kingdom Finally Come to an End

A chill ran down my spine.

It was a pretty unfair situation I was in: the distance between me and Zain was too small. If I tried casting a spell, I would have no time to finish it; thanks to his sword, I would be in two pieces by then.

Crossing weapons with him and coming out ahead was not very likely, and running off did not make much sense, either. If I exposed my back, I could find a sword or knife lodged into it immediately.

My only hope was that Gourry or the others in the next room would notice my predicament and give me a hand. Before that happened, there was only one thing I could do.

Buy time.

"So… The only one who can warp space and teleport like this is you."

"Think what you want," Zain answered me coldly.

Well… I guess, in a situation like this, it would've felt more disturbing if he had a charming attitude.

"If you guys had others among you with this skill, they'd have come with you here. But they didn't, meaning that they couldn't. Do you all have some basics skills you can use as a magic attack without Chaos Words, and a special ability that varies from person to

person? Like the way you can teleport, or how Zord can create that shockwave…"

Zain kept silent as he listened to my tricky guesswork.

"But you look different now than before. Is it because you are part demon?"

"No…" he said abruptly, his voice furious, filled with murderous intent. "It's because I finally found out. I learned the name of the human who made us lose our country."

He lost his country?

I suppressed a frown. It seemed pretty likely that his next line would be "her name is Lina Inverse"… even though I sure don't remember blowing up a country with any attack spell.

But if I responded with "What are you talking about? I have no idea what you could mean by that≡", he would probably attack me right away.

"When I became aware of this fact after the mission in Bezeld… I volunteered to abandon my humanity." Slowly, the aura of bloodlust around Zain began to expand.

Gourry, Millina, Luke! Someone please look into the room already!

"Well then…" he breathed, edging slightly towards me.

He's coming!

As I readied myself for his attack…

“Lina!” Gourry entered the room through the burnt door frame behind me —but it didn’t look like he came to give me a hand after clearing out his share of enemies. “You’re still fighting here too?”

“What do you mean by ‘here too’?”

Before he could answer my question, Luke and Millina also pulled back into the room, backing away from whoever was pursuing them.

“They got here also?!” Luke spat as he noticed the pinch I was in.

That means..

“It seems our reinforcements have arrived.” The moment these words left Zain’s mouth, a bunch of masked men in black appeared at the hole in the wall behind him. There were about five or six of them.

“You may have tried to gain time and wait for help,” Zain said, staring at me with a cold gaze, “but I have been waiting on my own reinforcements as well.”

Ugh!

It looked like we were already perfectly surrounded.

“Galzard.”

“Yes, sir.” A masked man in black next to the destroyed wall answered Zain’s call.

“Blow this room up with a Fireball. Don’t mind me.”

“Yes, sir!”

“What?!” the four of us yelled without thinking.

“Kamain, you will cast Freeze Arrow. Zaic, you’ll chant Dug Haut. Attack at the same time on my signal.”

After a man next to the wall, and another near the door answered in the affirmative, they began to chant their spells.

Oh shoot!

If they had hit us with all that magic at the same time, we would have had no spell to defend against them, and escaping this room did not seem possible either. Their strategy was based on using spells that had no effect on Zain, as he was a mazoku-human chimera.

But if we were hit by those spells, then what?

“That won’t work!” Gourry dashed towards the bunch of masked men in black near the door, but…

“Diem Wind!”

“Guh!” He was pushed back by the spell one of them shot at him.

In the same moment, the other spells were completed…!

“Blast Ash.”

After an ash-colored flash, the men in black near the hole in the wall were gone.

“What the—?” Zain turned around hastily, glancing back.

“Let me interrupt for a moment. I think it is time to settle things at last.”

The one who appeared in place of the men in black was… that man wearing a mask, who we saw before!

“Who are you?!” Zain demanded.

“Such unbecoming manners. If you are as impatient as this, then you’re not worthy of being called the ex-captain of the Royal Guard.”

Captain of the Royal Guard.

Those words from the masked man startled all the men in black. And then…

“Arc Brass!” As a booming thunderclap filled the room, the guards standing near the door were caught in Millina’s spell. A second later, Luke lunged forward, and took down several men with one strike.

“Oh well, it looks like the tables have turned,” the man wearing the mask murmured like he had nothing to do with the situation.

But the fact of the matter was that only one enemy remained standing in the room now: Zain. Although he wasn’t an easy opponent, it was still five against one. His chances of winning were pretty slim.

“Who… who the heck are you?” Zain’s gaze would not leave the man behind the mask; it seemed like he was more shocked by how the man knew about his past than how his fellows near the door were already down for the count.

“What if I said that my hometown is the same as yours?”

Hearing that, Zain's mouth curved into a wry smile. "Indeed… I see."

"What are you talking about?"

The man with the mask answered my question in an indifferent voice: "You do remember a country called 'Ruvinagard', don't you?"

Ah!

Ruvinagard.

At last, I could understand what this whole story was about.

The Republic of Ruvinagard.

Many people know that this country, part of the Alliance of Coastal States, was a kingdom several years ago. But there aren't that many people who know the real reason why the kingdom had been dissolved.

A secret experiment was conducted by the kingdom. It involved combining the mazoku and human races.

Its purpose was to build an army of such demons, which could be controlled by any ordinary human, not only summoners and the like. They kidnapped children everywhere to be used as test subjects, because the ego of children is not as developed, and merging them with a demon from the astral side was easier.

This despicable plan was put to an end by a several people, including me. It happened before I met Gourry.

And so the kingdom's plot was exposed to the world, and, while I only heard the rumors, they say that the other countries jointly

intervened. In the end, the Kingdom of Ruvinagard was dissolved, and it reappeared as a republic.

However…

What if some among the royal family responsible for the plan didn't regret what they did at all?

What if they fled the nation and set up base elsewhere, trying to conceal their identity? The locals did say that Laavas appeared in the city very suddenly.

What if he decided to take his ambitions even further than he did in the past?

If I looked at it this way, I could understand what Zain meant by losing his country. And why Laavas bore a grudge against me.

Of course it was their own fault, but if they were the kind of people who accepted that without complaints, they wouldn't have made a plan like creating a mazoku-human chimera in the first place.

Instead of putting a bounty on our heads, he might've tried to prevent me from escaping the town in a less obvious way by saying that he wanted to hire me I and Gourry. Then he could kill me later. I'm less sure about whether he hired Luke and Millina to take revenge on them because they opposed him in the incident in Bezeld, or whether he just did that on a whim.

"Looks like you finally understand what's happening," the masked man said with a laugh, watching my expression.

"Sort of… But I still don't get how he got close to the local lord."

“This man, Laavas and Lord Langmeyer are distant relatives. So the lord offered refuge to him in secret.”

“You investigated this well…” Zain murmured.

The masked man gave a nod. “As you can see, I’m certainly among the most talented special inspectors. Not to mention that I’m very popular with the ladies of the town as well.”

“So… you followed us here, hiding your face,” Zain added.

“There were too many people from my hometown here. Several of them knew my face, and it would have been an inconvenience if they noticed me.” He glanced at us. “Honestly, I was worried because I couldn’t find any evidence. But because of their interference, I managed to get quite a few things.”

Feh, so I’m your personal troubleshooter now?

“Heh…” Zain snickered, hearing the masked man’s words. “Then, as you said, it is time to settle things at last.” Abruptly, he began to chant a spell.

Not so fast!

“Blast Ash!” I launched my spell at him. I’ve been preparing it while he and the masked man were talking.

However…

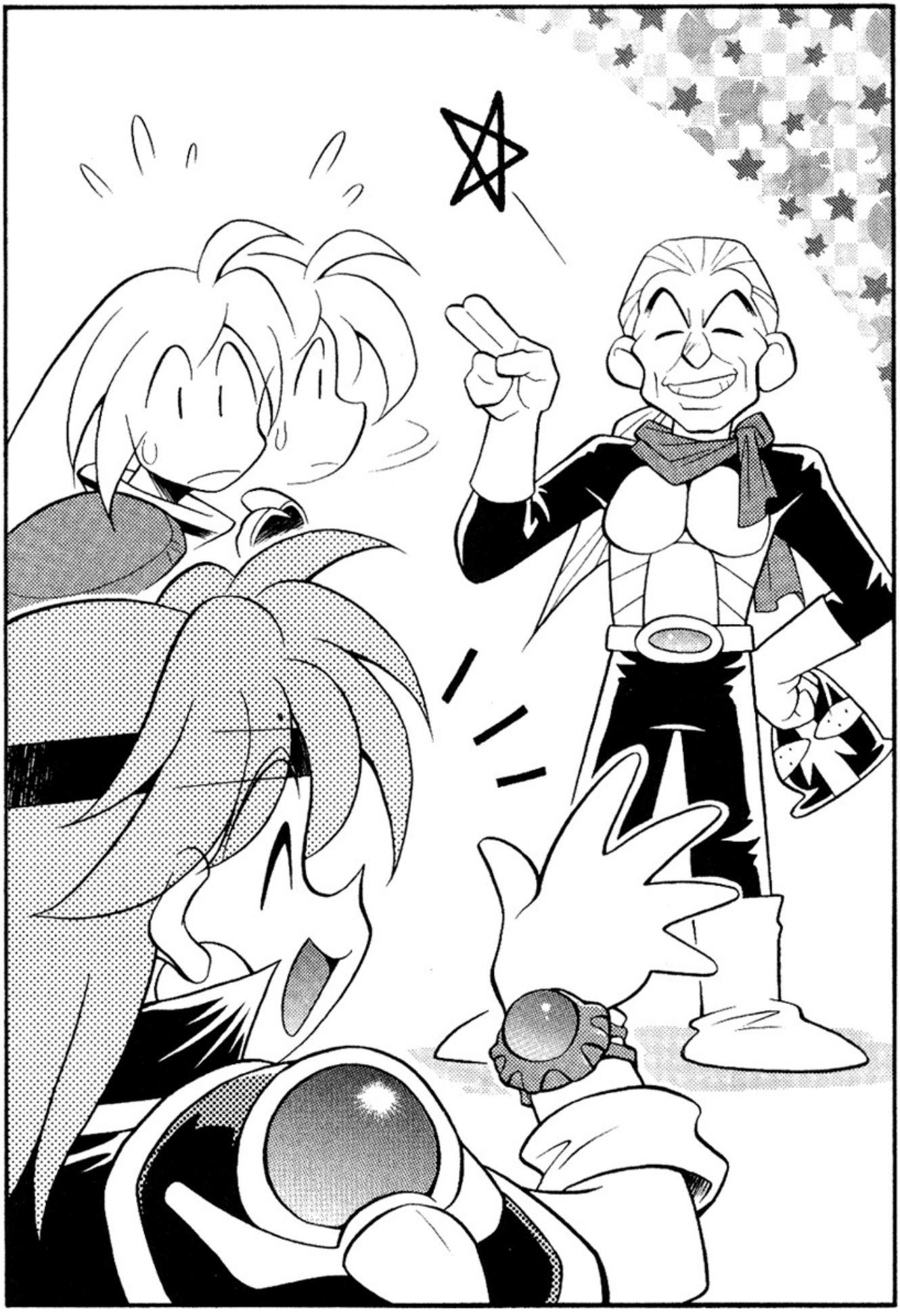
“Void!” In a second, Zain’s body melted in the air and disappeared; my spell hit nothing but an empty space.

Did he teleport?

“That jerk! Where did he go?” Luke shouted, looking around.

“Maybe he went to the castle,” the masked man answered him. “Perhaps he returned there to report to Laavas about us.” As he spoke, he removed the mask covering his head. “Sorry for being so late to greet you properly.”

Under the mask there was the calm face of a middle aged man with brown hair, apparently beyond his forties.



Of course, I knew who he is.

The middle aged man retrieved his badge depicting a coat of arms which was stacked away somewhere near his chest, and said, "I am the special inspector Wizer Freion of the Republic of Ruvinagard. I am pursuing the ex-king Bergis and the members of the former Royal Guard, who are conducting illegal magical experiments. That is my current duty, Lina Inverse."

"Right, so that was Laavas' real name. Anyway, long time no see, gramps. You looked pretty strong back there."

"You know this person, Lina?"

"Yes, a little," I answered Gourry's question with a wink. He was none other than one of the people who helped me ruin the plans of the Ruvinagard kingdom before. "I'll tell you the details later… first, let's go to the castle!"

In the middle of the night, the town was wrapped in silence. The five of us quietly made our way along an empty road, heading towards the castle which stood at the center of the town. We made quite a mess of the shrine during our fight, but tied up the sleeping mages anyway before heading out.

We figured the masked men in black would harass us on our way there, but there was actually no sign of them at all.

This fact was slightly irritating. Zain definitely reported to Laavas about the situation, but if they didn't attack us right now, that could only mean that they concentrated all of their forces in the castle. Including, of course, those mazoku-human chimeras we've

seen before.

“Well…” I murmured while walking, “In that case, it would be pretty easy to just blow the whole castle up with a Dragon Slave… too bad I can’t!≡”

“Are you insane?!” Gourry opposed me fiercely. The guy actually thought I would really do it. “The real lord is inside the castle! And there are soldiers there who know nothing about what’s happening and only follow Laavas’ orders in good faith!”

“Why are you so up in arms about this? Relax! It was just a joke. I brought it up as a simple idea to see if anyone would actually be okay with it.”

“So if anyone said ‘okay’, then you would blow the castle up with a Dragon Slave?” Gourry insisted.

“Uhm… Well… By the way, I heard that the lord has real son named Baitham, what could have become of him?”

“He may have been killed already,” Millina said in a even tone, like she always did. “The lord could yet be useful to Laavas. If there would be trouble, he could shift responsibility to him. Baitham, on the other hand, is nothing but a hindrance to him, so he does not need him alive. He might have killed him at the first opportunity.”

“Anyway…” said Luke, and came to a halt. So did we. “That doesn’t change what we have to do. We have to take care of that Laavas bastard.”

Before we knew it, we’ve already arrived to the front gates of the castle.

Booom!

The silence of the night was broken by the sound of a violent explosion. The castle doors, made from oak, were no better than sheets of paper for my boosted Dam Brass!

We crossed the narrow moat using Levitation, and through the destroyed door entered the courtyard.

If some of you would think it was pointless to make the door explode while I could just fly over it with Levitation again, then I'm sure those people don't have much experience with the world.

Right now, we came here to pick a fight with these guys. The basis of any fight is your confidence in winning. Since our enemies did not seem hard to manipulate and could not overwhelm us in terms of firepower, we could easily start off with an advantage if we bested them on this front by making them scared.

"W-What? Who are you?"

"Who are you people?"

Only a few soldiers came to gather there, looking puzzled, as if they haven't been briefed about the situation. There were no more than ten of them—but none of them belonged to the masked men in black.

The appetizer before the main course? Good! Then let's warm up before the real fight—

"Sleeping!" Luke and Millina put the soldiers to sleep with a sudden combined spell, before I could finish my own.

...Hey, what's this?! You just wasted my spell, you two!

"Look up!" Gourry's voice echoed around us.

Up?

I glanced above me—and could barely suppress a yell. On the western roof and on the ramparts, those masked men in blank stood in a long line—scores of them!

A crimson light seemed to emanate from their hands. Fireballs!

I see! They put their regular soldiers to the courtyard to hide their presence, and now were going to blow up everything once we arrived to the center of the it—while sacrificing their own fallen men as well.

"Fireball!" The orange lights left their hands at the same time!

Were they trying to turn the whole area into a sea of fire? We could not escape that… however, Lady Luck was on our side! The spell I've been casting previously was none other than…

"Bomb Di Wind!" Responding to the Power Words, the wind roared forth. This spell could create an explosive gust of wind affecting a wide area; I've intended to use it to get rid of the soldiers at first, but now I've let it fly above my head instead!

The wind made the balls of fire scatter, and a moment later we heard an explosion; the off-target flames and the air currents blasted several of the men in black away.

Before the searing hot wind dissipated, the five of us ran towards the door of the castle's main building.

“Haa!” Gourry yelled pretty unnecessarily, as his sword cut down the oak door without much effort.

“Don’t let them go!”

“After them!”

A bunch of the masked men in black jumped down from the ramparts to the courtyard and dashed towards the door. Their trap, which they hoped to kill us with in one blow, was ruined, so now they were acting rashly—which was more than enough for us. With a flash of light, the Blast Ash spells fired by me, Millina and old Wizer sent all of them to meet their maker.

There was no time to relax, though. The remaining men in black on the roof would soon enter the building from above. If I wanted to avoid a lengthy, cumbersome tussle with them, we had to find and defeat Laavas very quickly—the problem was where to find him.

“Luke, Millina! You know where the audience chamber is in this castle, right? Lead us there, quickly!”

“The audience chamber? Why?” Luke asked, his expression doubtful.

Ha, this guy doesn’t have much experience with the world, either. Why can’t he guess the intentions of a person like that…?

“Do you really need to ask?! Because Laavas would be there, obviously!”

The door creaked open, and beyond it there was a spacious, long room with a line of stone pillars, and a red carpet stretched across the middle.

At the end of the red carpet, then, there was a man sitting on a throne with dignity. Roughly twenty masked men in black gathered around him. He probably wouldn't have kept such a large force with him, but he knew how much was at stake now. Perhaps these men were all that was left of his army in the town.

"Hmm…" The man sitting on the throne, Laavas, let out a noise like he was intrigued by something. "You arrived here faster than expected from the entrance. You didn't look anywhere else, did you?"

"Yes, because we knew you were here," I told him.

"Oh? Please explain that to me. How could you know I am here?"

"It was clear as day." I pointed at Laavas with determination and said, "A third-rate villain like you loves to show off, so he'd prefer the most dramatic-looking spot!!"

The masked men in black stirred, upset by my provocative remark, and their bloodlust began to surge. Laavas himself, however, wasn't angry at all, only flashed a cynical smile.

"You say I'm a third-rate villain? I don't care what you call me. No matter what I'd say, you would not understand me either way."

"I don't *want* to understand to begin with," I spat.

"Well then, don't you think we're wasting time with this conversation?" With that, he rose from the throne and snapped his fingers. The masked men in black quickly formed a line between him and us, blocking our way. "Seeing how determined you all are, I

think there's no point in me staying here. I will be in the basement, studying. Please carry on."

He then turned around and started to walk away.

That was the signal that the fight had begun.

"Freeze Arrow!" Millina fired her spell after taking a step back from old man Wizer. The masked men in black scattered to avoid it, thus creating a small crack in their defence line.

Mr. Wizer immediately dashed into the gap; before anyone else could realize what was happening, he retrieved a sword from somewhere, slashed one of the masked men who was standing there in a daze, and chased after Laavas.

Wow, he's strong! He might be old, but he's definitely not out!

But I guess you might still be wondering: why was Laavas *really* in the audience chamber? If you think about it logically, the answer is obvious. Not attacking us with full strength was pointless, so he needed to gather all his masked men in one spot. But there were few places in the castle with enough room for so many to maneuver in a fight: the courtyard, the front hall… and since he was in neither, the only one that remained was the audience chamber. Laavas needed to be here also because it was safer to hide among his men before the fight started than to hide somewhere alone.

That's the real reason why I could guess right away where he was. What I said to Laavas was only meant to provoke him—he saw right through it, though. That meant that while he was pretty much off his rocker, at least he was no fool. It wouldn't have been

surprising if he had a secret weapon or two at hand.

So, I really wanted to give Mr. Wizer a hand, but the masked men in black blocking our way would not let us through that easily.

Gourry was crossing swords with two masked men in black at once. His blade was faster than either of them, and he met their blows easily as his two opponents failed to synchronize their strikes. This happened twice, then three times… then one of the masked men lost his balance as he tried to back away from Gourry's previous blow.

He never missed a chance like that before. But just when I thought that he'd slice his opponent with an upward strike… Gourry jumped back, and jerked his sword into a horizontal position.

A metallic sound hit the air, as if a small blade had bounced off his weapon.

"Ah! I didn't think you could cut that in half!" The strangely excited voice of Zord sounded from farther away, in the direction the dagger came from.

With a loud clang, Luke's sword blocked his opponent's downward thrust. At the same time, Millina slid between them from below, her blade cutting the masked man's stomach. Using the same momentum, her sword met the blow of another enemy; and the moment their blades connected…

"Blam Blazer!"

Her spell had just cut into the masked man in black—when a silvery glimmer if light neared her from the side.

“Dam Brass!” Luke’s spell barely managed to blow something akin to a silver needle off course. “You…” He stared at yet another masked man in black; the long nails on the man’s fingers were covered with metal. As he touched them together, a bluish, crackling light sprang to life within his palm.

He can charge those metal nails with electricitiy…

“So you gave up being a human, too?” Luke murmured as he regarded the man, an unnatural smile forming on his lips.

Meanwhile, I started to chant a spell while pulling out my short sword. But before I could finish, a black-masked form of a man appeared right in front of me!

Zain!

With a clang, my short sword barely managed to block the blade in his right hand. Zain responded by punching at me with his bare left fist—but it was no simple punch. There was some magical light sparkling in his palm.

Looks dangerous! As soon that thought formed in my mind, I threw my body backwards. As Zain didn’t expect this, he lost his balance and took a step back as well. Maybe it broke his concentration too, because the magical light disappeared from his left hand as it struck the air in vain.

I used this opportunity to plant my foot in Zain’s stomach.

“Ugh!” He might have given up his humanity, but judging from his low groan, that had to hurt. Still in the same position, I spun around the floor and let loose the spell I’ve been casting.

Not at Zain though, but at the other masked men in black.

"Flare Arrow!"

"Aaah!" They didn't see *that* coming; my spell sent quite a few of them sprawling on the ground. Zain used that time to lunge towards me, narrowing the gap between us. My fingers tightened around my short sword.

Eh, no, that won't work. Forget it.

I turned around again and ran towards the other masked men. I might be no pushover, but I had no intention of crossing swords with a man whose skills were on the same level as Gourry's.

Zain probably didn't expect me to just run away, so he hesitated for a moment—which was more than enough for me to get to the thick of his fellows.

Whenever Gourry's sword sliced the air, the sound of torn metal echoed around him as his blade carved into the invisible daggers of sorts Zord had sent his way. Since Gourry's sword could cut them, it seemed that the daggers were real physical objects, instead of magical shock-waves.

"Oh, incredible!" Zord spoke in an excited voice as he continued the assault with his invisible weapons. "I thought you could block my first shot only by chance, but I was wrong. How marvelous!" The metallic sound pierced the air again—and a small cut appeared on Gourry's chest, near his ribs. "But it seems you cannot see all of it."

He was right. Gourry was slicing at the invisible daggers Zord shot one by one, but after he cut them in half, he couldn't sense the

trajectories of the fragments precisely, no matter how outstanding his senses were. The pieces thus made countless cuts on his arms and legs. They were far from lethal injuries and would quickly heal on their own; but right now, they were distracting him. No matter the size, such injuries were definitely painful, and the pain hurt his concentration.

What if he fails to notice even one dagger because of it? The answer to that question was disturbingly clear.

One of that masked men in black apparently thought that Gourry's many injuries might give him a chance, so he tried getting closer to him.

"Ugh!" Before he could even reach Gourry, his body suddenly collapsed to the floor; one of Zord's invisible daggers seemed to have penetrated his chest.

"Ahahahahaha! What a fool! He dug his own grave!" Zord broke out in a burst of laughter, seeing the death of his comrade.

That was why Gourry did not move away, but stood his ground and defended himself with his sword instead. Zord was not only targeting him with his daggers, but filled the whole nearby area with them. It's needless to say how bad it would've been if Gourry took a wrong step there.

"Kwhahahahaha! Let's see how long you can keep this up!" Zord's hysterical laughter echoed across the hall.

Millina's spell deflected a few more metal nails shot at her. Trying to force their opponent into close combat, Luke grasped his

sword and ran straight at him.

Suddenly, however, the masked man's nails regrew to the same length as his weapon! As Luke's sword met those huge nails, bolts of lightning surrounded the latter with an electric crackle—anyone who went near that with a metal blade was as good as dead…

…if the blade was in their hands, that is.

Luke promptly let go of his sword just before it touched the nails, and—

"Dolph Strash!" His spell smashed into the black man in front of him. "I already guessed you'd try that. What a lame trick."

Not far from him, Millina released her own finished spell.

"Swightflang!" Dense fog formed around her, a strange spectacle to behold indoors. That wasn't the only oddity though; such magic which blocked sight was normally used for fleeing the scene…

"What the heck are you doing?" one of the masked men in black shouted as he dashed towards her.

One strike of my short sword fell a masked man in black, who hit the floor with a thump.

It looked like they underestimated my skill with the blade; the others withdrew a step and adjusted the grip on their weapons. Zain on the other hand stepped forward, approaching me from behind my back. With that, I was almost surrounded from all sides.

Good!

"Ray Wing!" Abruptly casting a spell of high speed flight, I sped

towards a couple of the surrounding masked men, as if trying to ram them—but I changed course mid-way, and targeted Zord, who seemed a bit too fascinated with tormenting Gourry.

Before I reached him, however, Zain once again materialized right in front of me—and extended his blade in my direction.

Not good, not good, not good!! In that moment, my predicament reminded me of a certain fishman whose body was literally cut into two in a similar situation. I desperately adjusted my spell to change directions again.

Wait a second…

Following a sudden idea, I stuck the blade of the short sword out through the wind barrier. I figured it would be an nice attack if I smash into someone like this, but…

"Oh crap!"

As I brought my short sword forward through the barrier—the wind pressure bent the blade!

I also lost balance, which resulted in the spell slipping out of my control, and I ended up crashing into one of the masked men in black next to me. The Ray Wing collapsed, and I rolled on the ground a few times with the momentum before I could get back on my feet.

I really shouldn't have done that.

At least my crash landing left three or four of the masked men in black knocked over. Zain, however, was on me and I could barely move away from his strike, which hit part of the floor instead.

The was the moment when Millina spread fog around the room.

“Ugh!” One of the invisible blades embedded itself into Gourry’s left arm. The cut was not deep, but it wasn’t an injury to ignore either.

“Kwahahahahahahaha! Are you almost at your limit?” Zord’s laughter reverberated through the room.

Then, all of a sudden, a milky haze started to obscure visibility —Millina’s fog had set in.

“What is this?” The moment those words left Zord’s mouth, Gourry began to charge at him! “You fool!” the chimera spat, and launched a shock-wave at his opponent. However…

“Haa!” Gourry’s blow shattered the unseen dagger with ease.

“What?!” Zord threw several more, but Gourry’s sword met each and every one of them. Zord’s ability was completely neutralized. “Is it because of the fog?”

He was right. Whenever he let an invisible shock-wave loose, it created an apparent cavity in the mist. Gourry could see the incoming attack simply by tracking that.

I get it! So that’s why Millina created the fog!

“Damn it!” Zord cried out nervously and fired another shock-wave. Regardless, Gourry narrowed the distance between them easily. “Urgh!”

His hand reached for the sword on his waist to face his opponent, but Gourry came at him much faster than he expected: the

sideways slash of his blade split Zord's body in two.

"What the—?" The man who tried to swing his blade towards Millina looked astounded. To him, it might've looked as if her figure suddenly vanished from view.

Actually, she just crouched down at the same place she'd been standing, but the reduced visibility of the fog might have confused the masked man's eyes.

Millina let loose a powerful upwards strike, and tore the man's stomach open. Just before, Luke fell another masked man in black who seemed to be losing his nerve, and was now engaged in a close quarters duel with a second one.

Seeing Luke and Millina take down their human-mazoku chimera comrade, the masked men in black around them have become scared, and could no longer fight on the same level as they did before.

"Dam Brass!"

—Boom!

Aaand there went another one. Seeing through his clumsy diversionary tactic, Millina's spell knocked her opponent down.

I was on the run, chanting a spell under my breath, trying to get as far as possible from Zain.

"Stop!" Like he had some really deep grudge against me, the guy kept chasing after me, showing no signs of giving up. Without any Chaos Words, he summoned some magical light into his hand and struck at me with it—unfortunately for him, the distance between us

was too great, and I easily avoided it. The blow cut into the fog behind my back, and there came the sound of something breaking apart; I was running next to the row of pillars now, so either one of them or the wall itself was hit.

Zain kept coming after me. He seemed to run faster than I could, so he was soon right behind me. The magical light still shone inside his left hand…

Now!

I brought my own left to my neck, and undid a small metal clasp. My cloak flew off my back, towards the surprised Zain, who dashed right into it!

I whirled around, sword in hand, and stabbed into the cloak.

My blow met no resistance—there's wasn't anything behind the black cloth. Also, I sensed a presence behind *me* again!

So he teleported? Thought as much!

"Blast Ash!"

My spell flashed to life behind my back. Blast Ash doesn't have to appear at a place within my field of vision, it only needed me to visualize the target before my mind's eye instead—so using it like this was more than possible.

I heard something metal hit the ground at my feet. It was Zain's sword.

When I glanced back, I saw nothing but black speckles of dust, which slowly scattered into the white fog. That was the end of Zain,

who died without a sound.

Bamm!

We kicked the door in, and it revealed five or six armed soldiers in the room behind it. Some of them leaned against the wall, some of them were sitting on the floor, while others were playing a game of cards at a small table.

All of them stopped what they've been doing and stared at us.

After dealing with all of the mazoku-human chimeras, our progress proved to be fast. The four of us wiped out the remaining masked men in black, who were completely terrified by then, with a couple of sword strikes and spells; a few managed to flee, but there was no time to chase them. We had to go after Laavas and Mr. Wizer as quickly as possible.

Well, we had to, but the problem was that we didn't know where they went. Initially, we could follow the corridor they ran off in, but a few steps later we've been greeted by a fork, which left us without a clue.

So…

The four of us decided to explore the place randomly.

Laavas told us that he went into the "basement" to study his experiment, but when I asked Luke about it, he said that he knew of no part of the basement which would fit the mold for a research facility. But we were certain that there had to be some secret parts of the basement and/or some hidden paths leading there in this castle. The two men we were going after probably headed towards that

place.

Of course, Laavas would've hardly told Luke and Millina about it, so we could not help but go with the least efficient method of searching through all the rooms which caught our attention.

"Eh, looks like no luck here either." Luke clicked his tongue, and turned around.

"Hey! Wait!" one of the soldiers guarding the chamber called after him. "What's up? When can we get out of this room already?"

He seemed to be embarrassed. Does that mean they didn't hear anything about the situation so far? Judging from the soldiers' expressions, they appeared to think of Luke and Millina as their allies… So are they just being deceived by Laavas, and cooperating with him without knowing all of his plans?

I don't know whether that's true or not, but if they think we're on the same team, then sorry guys, but I have to make use of that.

"You don't know yet?" I asked.

"How could we know anything?" the soldier replied. "All of a sudden, we were told to 'stay here and do not leave this room until further orders'. Then a little while ago, we heard some strange noise coming from somewhere…"

"I'll explain later," I told him.

"You… You were invited here by Lord Laavas recently…"

"I said let's talk about that later. If you know anything about it, please tell us about the way leading to the hidden part of the

basement! Lord Laavas is in a dangerous situation!”

That was not a lie in itself. I simply meant that it was dangerous to leave Laavas on his own right now.

“All right, I will accompany you as well!” A middle-aged soldier, apparently the captain, stood up, grasping his sword.

Of course we didn’t want them to follow us, but they wouldn’t agree to that now. So, the four of us, along with the captain and ten soldiers under his command, ended up running side by side down the corridor.

A short while later, the captain stopped at a place that seemed to be a dead end. I discreetly signalled Gourry, Luke and Millina with my eyes to slowly back away from the soldiers.

The captain turned a candlestick to the side and pushed one of the bricks into the wall. Stone grinding on stone, the wall at the dead end immediately moved to reveal a passage. It was too narrow for more than a single person to enter at once.

“Here!” the captain spoke, turning back to us.

Thanks for all your hard work.

“Sleeping!” My magic made all the soldiers flop down to the ground, snoozing.

“Lighting!” With Millina’s spell at the lead, the four of us entered the passage.

Ahead of us, we saw stairs that lead downwards toward the basement.

“Great, we did it!” Luke declared, running down, Millina, Gourry and I behind him. We soon got to a door, and he reached for the handle. “Damn, it’s locked! Wait, I’ll…”

Before Luke could chant his spell, Gourry stepped forward to face the door, and…

“Yaah!” With a sharp sound, the door broke down and fell to the ground.

Right on, Gourry! Looks like we have no use for a key here!

We entered the room—then halted in mid-step, our words stuck in our throats.

As far as the magical light floating above the doorway let us see, there was an abundance of gold and silver all around. Armors with embedded jewels, swords and ornaments were crammed into the otherwise pretty huge room.

And above all, it was not any normal kind of loot. If you know something about magic, you can notice it instantly: the treasures in the room were all magical!

“Wow! Amazing! Superb! Everything is enchanted! Oh, oh! If Millina would put this necklace on, she would look *so* beautiful! ≡”

“Great! Woohoo! Incredibly awesome! I could sell this necklace for a small fortune! ≡”

“Is this really the time to keep going on like that?” Hearing Millina’s cold yell, Luke regained his senses.

Err, now that I think about it, maybe our actual goal was

something about chasing Laavas… Of course, there was no sign of him or old Wizer in the room. But anyway, my primary objective before this whole mess started was finding a magic sword, and I could sell the swords here by… by the dozens…

But still, I couldn't simply overlook the stuff with Laavas and Wizer because of all the riches here.

"All right! I'm done with looting the place until next time!" I spoke with determination while still stashing away some smaller trinkets into the pockets near my chest.

"You think you could find this place again?" Millina murmured to herself with astonishment.

Either way, this room wasn't the 'secret basement' we hoped to find Laavas in; he had to be in a different one.

So, we have to repeat the whole 'wander around and ask people if they heard of a hidden passage'-routine again?

Damn… This really sucks.

No later than those thoughts formed in mind…

Ka-boom!

With an explosion, part of the room's wall collapsed!

What the hell?

After the cloud of dust settled, who we saw on the other side of the hole was…

"Hi there… All of you are here, I see…"

“Mr. Wizer!” I shouted.

Yep, the man who stumbled through the debris of the collapsed kicking up dust was the same old Wizer who we last saw chasing after Laavas alone. He didn’t look anything like a triumphant general who just defeated the enemy though. His body was covered in injuries; neither of them looked fatal, but some looked pretty deep.

“Here it comes!” Hearing Wizer’s voice, all of us turned towards the collapsed wall… and a huge shadow with unclear outlines stepped forward from there, moving at a slow pace.

A mazoku? It certainly seemed like one in terms of appearance, but it looked different than your run-of-the-mill lesser demon or brass demon too. Its skin was abnormally pale, like that of a drowned corpse, and three twisted horns sprouted from it on the left and the right unsymmetrically. Its entire body looked misshapen, distorted, with negative energy emanating from it which felt almost suffocating.

Still… I don’t exactly know why, but the higher ranked a mazoku is, the more human-like it appears. Since this guy’s appearance was pretty bizarre, he shouldn’t have had enormous powers—but then I could not imagine how such an opponent could’ve caused good old Wizer so much trouble…

“Oh… Why are you at such a place, everyone? Perhaps you people found the wrong room,” Laavas’ voice could be heard from behind the demon. He calmly stepped forward through the hole.

“You bastard! Don’t you know when to quit?” Luke spat, unsheathing his sword. “Sending a demon like that against us won’t

make any difference!”

“Hmph.” Laavas threw a thoughtful glance towards the creature beside him. “This man was sleeping in a nutrient fluid until now. He’s a failed experiment just like those who were resting inside the facility where Zain invited the two of you earlier.”

A failed experiment?

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Are you saying that all those chimeras were originally humans who you kidnapped?”

“Sure,” Laavas answered me in a remorseless voice, as he studied the demon’s face with an unblinking gaze.

This man is…

“This man was a quite a special case in my experiments. I added several talents at random… but as you can see, the burden to his body was too great, so he ended up in such a form. He might be unbalanced and unstable, but he has many abilities.” He subsided into silence for a moment, and turned back towards us. “Let me introduce him. This is half-demon experiment subject number one, Baitham Fritz Langmeyer. He is the one who should have been the next lord, originally.”

What…!? The four of us gasped.

Okay, maybe if old Wizer heard of this earlier he wouldn’t have tried to battle the demon.

“The castle and the land belong to the Langmeyers, and there were so many people around to disturb me at the beginning. It is said that a man should not suffer obstructions to his work. Ridding

yourself of such hindrances is easy, of course, but hiding the evidence of their annihilation isn't. Why not use them as test subjects then? The obstructions vanish, and the experiment can progress as well. It's not like any of those who lost their humanity could voice their complaints about it. Don't you think that is pretty reasonable?"

"That's not 'reasonable', the word you're looking for is 'inhuman'!" I shouted with an unbridled burst of anger.

Laavas' voice, however, remained calm. "All through the ages, such radical rationalism was never understood."

"I don't know difficult words like those," Gourry stepped forward, pulling out his sword, "but regardless, I cannot let you keep doing this."

"Neither can I." I took hold of my sword too.

Laavas smiled a little. "I see. It's just as well, though; I would not let you live, anyway. Go, Baitham."

"Gwuaaaaah!" Hearing his words, the half-demon Baitham let out a loud cry. He seemed to be completely under Laavas' control.

"Freeze Arrow!" The shout belonged to Millina, who fired her spell in Laavas' direction. Before it reached him, however, Baitham's left fist struck and smashed her projectile—and then he immediately dashed towards us!

We quickly scattered. All of us, except for Gourry, who remained standing there, readying his sword against the half-demon.

Hey! You really plan on hitting the guy?

“Yaa!”

He whipped around, dodged Baitham’s blow and landed his own!

“I cut some tendons in the leg,” said Gourry, his attention focused both on Laavas and the half-demon, not wavering for a moment. “You won’t be moving for a whi—”

“Ghyaaaa!” Before he could finish, Baitham lunged at him with a scream!

“What?”

But how…?!

Hesitant, Gourry jumped too widely to the side and hit one of the treasure piles.

“Well now, don’t mess up this room too much,” Laavas spoke with a snicker. “Didn’t I tell you that I put all kinds of talents into him? Such small injuries are healed almost instantly. Even if you cut his neck, hands and feet all at once, Baitham will keep moving.”

The ankle and the backside of the half-demon’s knee were stained with red; these were probably the parts Gourry had cut before and which healed right away. The chimera looked us over, as if planning his next move.

“Baitham. Do not hesitate, just kill them.”

“Oooooh!” The half-demon answered Laavas’ order with a cry. Dozens of Flare Arrows appeared in front of his eyes, apparently aimed at Luke and Millina—and could also hit old man Wizer from

the side!

Darn it! Those two can avoid it, but Wizer can't move quickly enough in that condition!

With a swish, the arrows of flame rained down upon the three of them all at once!

"Demon Gale Strike!" Luke's sword cut into the air, creating a wild gust of wind that scattered the incoming Flare Arrows!

"A magical sword?" Laavas' spoke from the back with admiration.

That's right. Luke's blade, of unknown make, could create powerful wind possessing the same destructive force as a Dam Brass with a single blow, tapping into the willpower of its wielder.

And Luke shot forward—straight at Baitham!

"Don't think wrong of me!" he whipped around and slashed the half-demon's right arm clean off his shoulder. Then with the same momentum he sped towards Laavas!

Right, if we could defeat Laavas, there would be no one to control Baitham. Though I wasn't sure Baitham would be calmed down only by that.

Luke struck with his sword… and with a ear-wrenching noise, his blade was broken!

"What the hell?!" he shouted. It looked like Laavas didn't have a weapon; he just pushed Luke's sword away with his bare hands.

Could he be a…?!

“Arrgh!” Luke quickly stepped back. With a cracking noise, his right shoulder guard fell to the ground.

“Of course, so you tried taking me down first. A valid tactic. However—”

“Khyaaaah!” Baitham’s scream interrupted Laavas’ words. From the stump where his arm was cut off, his flesh seemed to be deteriorating, its color becoming black.

“Hmm, was he even more unbalanced than I thought?” Laavas mumbled to himself calmly, as Baitham screamed even louder. “If he receives more than a certain amount of damage, his self-healing ability overloads itself somehow…”

The scream softened into a faint, painful moan—and then died away completely, Baitham’s body collapsing to the floor at the center of the room, his limbs spread out.

“He didn’t prove as useful as I expected,” said Laavas. “Well, at least I don’t have to worry about disposing him later.”

“You bastard!” Gourry spat, his grip tightening around his sword.

He might have noticed it already, just like Millina, who made no move while all of this was happening.

Slowly, Laavas gaze swept over our stunned faces.

“Although it’s the worst of the worst tactics for a commander of troops to enter battle directly… that will just have to do for now.” Was it insanity sparkling in his eyes, or…? “I will kill you all right here.”

“Dam Brass!” Taking his words as a signal, I launched my prepared spell…

…but Laavas swatted it away with nothing but his hand!

Seeing that, there no longer was any doubt.

“Laavas,” I said to the man who retained his composed smile even though he lost all of his subordinates, “you’re a… a mortal demon, too…”

“A mortal demon? That is quite an interesting appellation,” Laavas said as he walked towards us in a leisure pace. Luke hurriedly stepped back, struck by the extreme bloodlust that radiated from him. “It proved, well, quite difficult to progress any further in my plans while keeping my humanity intact. The technology for it was completed recently. It’s good to give power to my subordinates, but it would’ve been irritating if they got too confident and tried to revolt. To keep that from happening, I had to become stronger than them. It is that simple.”

This man… I thought he’s just some third-rate who treats his underlings violently, but…

So the reason why Zord seemed so intimidated upon hearing Laavas’ name was not merely because he feared punishment from his superiors—but because he was terrified of Laavas’ enormous strength…

“As an amateur when it comes to martial arts and magic, I was curious how much stronger I would become… but this is actually the first time I put this power to the test!” In that moment, both of Laavas’ hands seemed to sparkle… and two magical blades sprang forth from them, heading towards me and Gourry!

“Uh!” We quickly dodged by moving back. The blades hit the enchanted goods stacked up in the room instead—a chill ran down my spine as I saw a magical helmet rolling around the floor, cut

cleanly into two like butter.

“I even amaze myself! It was a bit stronger than I imagined! Hahahaha!” Laavas laughed, his next attack heading towards Luke.

Luke avoided it easily, grabbed one of the stored swords in the room and unsheathed the blade. “You won’t use it any way you please!”

A small shock-wave shot forth from the tip of Laavas’ fingers. When Luke tried to strike back, his blade shattered like it was made of glass.

“Millina! Take the old guy upstairs!” I called out. Having an injured person around put us at a disadvantage. Millina nodded, and began to lead him up the stairs.

“You can’t! You won run away!” Laavas shouted, his hands assuming a posture that seemed to be part of a spell. “Void!”

What?

Laavas’ form suddenly faded away! And then…

“Gaah!” Following Millina’s scream, she and old man Wizer rolled down the stairs.

“Millina?!” Luke shouted, running up to her.

“I… I’m okay.” With difficulty, she forced herself to her feet, and backed away along with Luke and Wizer.

“Hmm… was it too weak this time?” came the voice of a man who descended down the stairs. Needless to say, it was Laavas.

“Elmekia Lance!”

“Useless!” My spell was torn apart by a blast of magic energy Laavas released. At the same time, Gourry sprinted at him, sword in hand. “Like I said, it’s usele—”

Gourry, however, ran faster than Laavas expected, dashed behind his opponent’s back and struck with the blade in his right.

“Uh!” Laavas grunted. He only barely managed to reach out and break the sword with his hand.

But that was not the end of it. Shivering, Laavas’ body shook slightly.

There was another sword in Gourry’s left hand—he probably picked up one in the room. The moment Laavas snapped the blade in his right, his left thrust into the opening and pierced his opponent’s stomach.

Is it over?

Just as I thought that, Gourry released his sword and made a huge jump backwards. With a sharp sound, the magical blade Laavas sent his way chipped away the tip of his shoulder guard.

“Really amazing!” Though he received a major blow from Gourry, Laavas’ enthusiasm did not waver one bit. “Had you lowered your guard, thinking you have won, I would have ended you easily!”

With that, he pulled out the sword that was stuck in his stomach. No blood came out of the wound.

Wasn’t he hurt at all?

“All right! First of all…” Laavas turned his head slowly toward Millina and Mr. Wizer.

“Ruby Eye Blade!” Luke shouted, dashing towards him. Like before, the sword he picked up from the floor was bathed in a crimson light.

Laavas looked over his shoulder.

“Argh!” cried Luke; he fell and rolled several times on the floor. Something not quite a spear nor a tentacle had come out of Laavas’ back and penetrated his shoulder before also wounding his upper thigh.

This man is no longer anything like a human at all!

“Blast Ash!” Timing her attack to that very second, Millina released the spell she’s been chanting, but…

“Void!” Again, Laavas disappeared, only to materialize right next to Millina! “No more funny tricks!”

“Urgh!” Millina groaned, hit by a fierce kick.

Then Laavas raised his right hand towards her…

“Blast Ash!” My spell created a black fog, which covered the upper half of his body…

I don’t really know why I did it.

It was just an instinctual move—but the moment I released that spell, I was already in mid-jump to the side. Right after, a magical blade cut through the air, and struck the place where I’ve been standing.

Making a sound similar to a deflating balloon, the black fog from my Blast Ash swirled around, fading away.

"Gyaaaaah!" Laavas emerged from the mist with a scream.

Did he manage to break a spell with enough power to kill a brass demon all by itself? His scream of pain and his slightly pale face were the the only effects Blash Ash seemed to have on him—this man is much stronger than some of the pure mazoku!

At the spot where Laavas' magical blade passed by me, all the enchanted gadgets and even the stone floor itself was broken to pieces.

Wait, no. Most of the magic items were indeed destroyed, but I could still glimpse a silver sparkle between them.

"Gourry!" I yelled. "That sword!"

"Right!" he answered, running towards me. Laavas chose this moment to launch a magical blade at him!

He won't be able to avoid it!

The instant that thought formed in my head, a sharp sound filled the room.

Laavas' blade was shattered easily—by the sword Gourry held in his hand.

"Damn!" Anxiety took hold of Laavas' features right away. He ran to the wall and picked up another magical sword, pulling the blade out of its sheath.

Gourry immediately charged at him. The sword in his right hand,

Laavas let out several magical blades from his left. However, each time Gourry struck, his sword tore the incoming blade apart completely.

"Urgh!" Laavas hastily tightened his grip around the sword in his right hand.

It was possible that his weapon had even more powerful magic than Gourry's. Maybe he planned on blocking Gourry's blow, halting his advance and then firing another magic blade from his left at point blank range.

However, the power of the swords was one thing, the difference in skill between their wielders was another!

With a huge circular strike, Gourry's blade severed Laavas' midsection, cutting his body in two.

But…

"Unnh!" Still in mid-strike, Gourry hurriedly twisted his body in the air. A spear-like thing shot from Laavas' back and sped past him.

"That jerk!" Laavas bellowed.

Quickly creating some distance between the two of them, Gourry extended his sword toward Laavas again.

Even though his body was cut in two, Laavas did not lose his footing… err, or whatever the correct phrase is for that. What the heck is his body made of? After he lost everything below his stomach, his torso remained floating in the air.

"You trash! How dare you ruin my body like this…!" he

shouted. Several tentacles emerged from the injury on his right hand, which was cut by Gourry's sword.

How can this guy be alive, not to mention move in such a condition?! He must have fused with a pretty high-powered mazoku.

Turning around, Laavas swung his all the tentacles on his right hand at Gourry!

Gourry's blade struck, and it seemed like it managed to hit the tentacles—but one of them actually avoided his sword and seemed to tremble for a moment…

With the sound of thunder, a lightning bolt was shot out of the tentacle, and managed to score a perfect hit!

Gourry could not even utter a yell—he fell to the ground immediately. Although he tried to stand up right away, the attack must have paralyzed most of his body, because all he managed was a slight twitch.

I wanted to help him, but my spell was not finished yet. Laavas drew closer to Gourry…

"Dynast Brass!" The sound of thunder hit the air again, this time because of a lightning storm that enveloped Laavas' entire body! The person who cast the spell was none other than good old Wizer, who right up to know was forced into the role of a spectator.

His face distorted by pain, Laavas' mouth opened to a silent scream!

It's over! That spell can easily defeat even pure mazoku! If he

was hit by it—

"Gwaaaaaaah!" Laavas bellowed—and the field of lightning was suddenly blasted apart!

It can't be!

"I won't stand to this anymore!" Laavas' left hand created a shock-wave, and…

"Agh!"

Gourry, Luke, Millina and old Wizer were blown away, hitting the nearby piles of treasure.

"Nnnh, I could no longer release the amount of power I wanted…!" Laavas spat, staring at his left.

Then ever so slowly, he turned to face me.

I immediately stopped the spell chant I had going. The spell I've been trying to cast… was the same one Laavas neutralized moments before.

This was a bad joke. He might have strengthened himself through the fusion with a mazoku, but Laavas having such enormous power still made no sense. His offensive ability was roughly on par with that of a lower-level mazoku—but if a pure lower-level mazoku took a hit from Dynast Brass head on, it would have been killed instantly.

Unless…

"Hm…" A small noise left my throat as I figured out a possible reason. "Right. I finally found out how can you be so persistent…"

“Oh?” Hearing that, Laavas narrowed his eyes, apparently interested.

“Your clothing, and all the accessories you wear,” I said. “They’re all magic items, aren’t they? And all of them have powers focused on protection and healing.”

If you think about it, it would’ve been really strange if a guy who had piles of magical stuff down here did not wear any of them himself. And for a selfish guy like him, who cares only for his own well being (even though he actually gave up his humanity already), it’s an obvious choice to only go for a perfect defense.

“Right. So you recognized it at last?” Laavas gave a small nod to my theory. It was not his own magical power that deflected Blast Ash and even Dynast Brass, but the power of the magic items he was wearing. “And? Now that you realized the truth, what are you going to do with it?”

Oops…

The reply got stuck in my throat.

“Even if you know, you have no proper way for dealing with it,” Laavas continued. “And you are the only one left standing, as your friends have already fallen. So, what are you going to do?”

He’s exactly right; even knowing this, the situation didn’t change at all.

If I used the Dragon Slave, I could take him down, but I cannot cast that spell in such a place—which means my only choice is to use a small-scale spell that works on mazoku, like Dynast Brass, but

boosted with the talismans…

Nah, I feel he'd easily avoid that.

Anyway, even if I had no plan, I had to do *something*.

I started chanting a spell.

"It is useless!" Laavas shot a magical blade from his left hand in response. I guessed his move easily, and jumped to the side to dodge.

His attack was weaker than it was before. He might've been protected by all sorts of magical gadgets, but he was still cut in two and hit by several spells, and that must have impaired him at least a bit.

The tentacles on Laavas' right arm struck towards me.

Lightning again?

A sword rolled on the ground in its sheath under my feet; I kicked it at the tentacle that seemed to be aiming at me. Immediately after, lightning escaped the tentacle and hit the blade!

I proceeded to kick several other nearby pieces of treasure at Laavas.

It was childish to fight someone like this, I guess, but there was no other way to buy time. Anyway, it surely would've been too dangerous to try distracting a man who can grow tentacles from his body using a sword.

"Damn!" Laavas had to block all the things I bombarded him with using his tentacles, and sure enough, it made him pretty

irritated. “I demand you stop this!”

Swinging his left, he created a wide, long-range magical shock-wave. It wasn’t very powerful, but it filled the whole room—there was no way I could avoid it.

Then instead… I threw my body backwards, jumping away from the floor.

The shock-wave hit me with a slight thump.

While lunging back decreased its power, it still hurt a little. I managed to endure it though, and I landed on my feet, kicking a couple of trinkets to the side.

And my spell was complete.

“Dynast Brass!”

“Void!” Our voices hit the air almost at the same time.

Laavas’ body faded, then disappeared entirely.

Argh! I knew he would avoid it!

My column of lightning flared up in the air meaninglessly—and there was a presence behind my back.

That I also expected though. A magical blade passed by me as I jumped to the side. I turned around and hopped back one more time to face Laavas again.

Damn. It’s the same as before.

He probably timed his teleport to when I completed my spell and spoke the Power Words. Even if he chose his destination randomly, I

could've tried launching spells at him again and again, guess where he would appear and deliver a decisive blow, but… While I don't know whether Laavas was aware of it or not, he had a tendency of appearing behind his opponent's back, fitting of his evil character. It would be useful if I could take advantage of that.

I don't think I could cast Dynast Brass behind me to catch him off-guard. I'm sure I would be caught within the spell too.

Then maybe I could try measuring the time between Laavas' dis- and reappearance, use that to move into a blind spot, and… No-no, chances are Laavas would be on the lookout for that as well…

Ah… yes! This will work!

The spell I'm going to use is: Ragna Blade.

The incantation that can meld chaos into the form of a sword, the black magic spell of absolute power—powerful enough to cut a mazoku to ribbons even if it can endure a Dragon Slave.

If he's hit, then regardless whether his whole body is shielded by magical items or not, he won't be able to withstand it. The drawback to this strategy is the spell's short range and the even shorter time I can sustain it.

Still, this is the only way to finish this fight!

"Curses!" Laavas shot magical blades at me continuously as I started to chant the spell. He probably did not want to get into the same situation as before, so he skipped the bolts of lightning and the wide-range shock-waves this time. His blades struck the magical gadgets around the room, each one sending glittery fragments of

silver and gold to dance around in the air.

After an amount of blades passed by me, I finally completed my spell!

“Ragna Blade!”

“Void!”

As I had expected, in response to my Power Words, Laavas distorted space around him. The sword of darkness already created in my hands, I made my move.

Laavas materialized—right behind the spot where I had been.

The moment he appeared, he shot magical blades in front of him, and tentacles sprouting from his shoulder and back struck sideways and behind him at the same time.

But I was nowhere to be found.

Letting out a confused sound, Laavas unwittingly halted, not seeing where I am.

And then, without even making a sound…

…my sword of darkness sliced him in two from the bottom up.

The same noise could be heard twice: the sound of something hitting the ground. I dismissed the sword of darkness, glanced back, and there it was: Laavas’ upper body, on the floor in two pieces. Then in front of my eyes, what was left of him broke down, turning into white sand.

That was the end of the crazy king Laavas, who made himself

into a mortal demon.

After seeing him disappear, I sat up on the ground. Perhaps he himself had no idea how he died, although it was pretty easy to explain: The moment he was gone, I dove to the ground and laid there on my back, my hands stretched upwards. Then right above the spot where I was, Laavas reemerged.

He didn't realize. There was a blind spot right under him, as he had lost his lower body.

I straightened my back, trying to unwind after the taxing exercise.

"Finally… It's over…"

"You're not done yet, you know…" Gourry replied to my quiet murmur. He could barely turn his head towards me, while everyone else was unconscious. "Heal my wounds first… please…"

"Anyway, I want to express my gratitude first," Luke said, sounding a little bit hesitant. It was already the next day after the fight in the castle, and we were sitting around a table, everyone's health and stamina restored.

Well, after our 'well-deserved rest', it was already around lunch time when we could get up and gather around the table, so… we were in the middle of eating brunch.

"Gratitude?" I parroted, momentarily stopping to shove a piece of bread into my mouth.

"Yeah," he said. "If you didn't defeat that man, we would've been killed. Anyway, I thought I had to say thanks."

“I don’t need your thanks. Just give me money. Like, a thousand gold.”

She must have noticed I was serious, because Millina, sitting next to Luke, spat out the soup that was in her mouth, while wearing the same indifferent look as always.

“Stop joking,” Luke deadpanned.

“Ah, so you conveniently want to stop now?” I insisted.

He tried to change the topic. “I wonder what will become of the local lord…”

“One. Thousand. Gold.” I pressed on, while Luke evaded my gaze and tried even harder to change the subject, but I tried just as hard to change it back.

“Maybe someone else will be nominated for the title of the lord in his place…”

“Alright, then 999 gold.”

A drop of sweat rolled down on Luke’s cheek.

Good! One final push!

“By the way,” he added, “those masked men in black seemed to be extending their operations to other places. They might be still hard at work, maybe not even knowing that their boss is dead.”

“Fine, I’ll make it 990 gold then.”

Luke was the one to lose his temper first. “Gaah! How can you be so persistent?!”

Ha, what an amateur.

"Hey! We gave a hand too!" he snapped. "Not to mention that I already saw you coming out of the castle with some of the treasures —including that sword!"

He pointed with his fork at the blade on Gourry's belt.

Ah, right. That was the sword which endured Laavas' magical blades, and which sliced him into two. Although the weapon's origins and components were uncertain, there was no doubt that this was a magical sword of considerable power.

Still… first that mysterious shoulder guard I bought earlier in another town, and now this mysterious sword… somehow, the mysterious stuff seemed to be piling up around us.

Well, let's think about that later.

"You're right. By the the time I noticed, some things from that room somehow ended up inside my pocket." I agreed with him readily. "But Luke, that is that, and this is this. You have to know human greed has no limits."

"Hey! If you want to get money, just go back to the castle and take whatever you want from that room!" he fumed.

"Oh shoot!" I exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

"You two… Wasn't that enough already? How can you speak of such criminal behavior in front of a special inspector?" old man Wizer interfered, looking annoyed with a sandwich in hand.

"Okay, forget it then," I muttered. "What are you planning to do

from here on, anyway?"

"Same as usual," Millina answered simply.

"Yeah. We'll travel all across the country seeking treasure," Luke said. "Our journey of love with Millina will continue."

"Not of love. But it will."

"No, it won't," Wizer cut into her reply. "You see, there is still the matter of dealing with some loose ends. The people who are not aware of the situation know only that an incident took place in the castle last night, and Lord Laavas had disappeared—which is the truth. If we leave things as they are, you will be leading the list of suspects."

"Ah…" The four of us let out a collective groan.

Come to think of it… We have shown our faces to castle soldiers when we were searching for the basement entrance… Maybe they already found out our names…

"I would take care of that problem anyway, but you people have to give various testimonies, so after establishing contact with the Sorcerer's Guild, the statements and the on-site investigation will take about a month," Wizer explained. "I'm afraid we are all in the same boat with this, so you have to follow my lead."

With that, he flashed a charming smile in a manner that nonetheless seemed nasty.

Unnh…

'And then, we finally left the city of Solaria'—apparently, we

had to save that phrase for later.

Afterword

A = Author—Hajime Kanzaka / L = L-sama / S = Subordinate S

A: Madam! Did you hear? The 10th volume of Slayers, 'Evil devices in Solaria' has come out.

L: How shameless of you to just announce it like that so late! Write more quickly next time!

A: Sniff-sniff

L: Don't try playing innocent with this sudden blubber-routine.

A: By the way, it's once again the time of the year to send out the New Year's Cards!

L: Another random topic switch… Well, it doesn't matter anyway…

A: So, I want to let you know one thing about the New Years' Cards. The author asked his family and friends to create the address book for it, and it will be completed around November. This means that the letters that did not make it to the author before the address book's completion will only be included in next year's New Year's Card giveaway. So if you did not send a letter to the author up to now, please don't write letters later that the card did not arrive, because this was likely the reason. I will try sending out as many cards I can, but some requests will surely be passed to the next year. And if you omitted the exact address or your name, then of course I cannot help you. Please be careful with that.

L: Some people really do that?

A: Yes, quite a few. They write "Please send a reply with a New Year's Card!", but no address or name is provided.

L: That seems really pointless.

A: Right.

L: Anyway, the picture on this year's cards will be my lovely face again?

A: Right, sure… As a matter of fact, I was about to write "the idiot-looking L and her subordinate S" on this year's card.

—Thump!

L: Whaat?! Idiot-looking L?! I held back right now, but the next time I'll really kick your ass for this!

S: It looks like you didn't hold back right now either.

L: It is said that "a lion uses all of his strength even to catch a rabbit"! Hmm… The author is knocked out, so help me with the afterword.

S: Oh? Can I? Hee-hee! It's been such a long time since I could officially appear in the afterword! I can finally afford some white rice!

L: Are you that poor?

S: Err, anyway… right, so the topic was the New Year's Card! According to what the author said, it looks like I am going to be on it too!

L: Last year you were a snowman. How about a Christmas tree this time?

S: Sniff-sniff… How can you say such terrible things…? Are you serious?

L: No, no.

S: Sniff-sniff.

L: Well, let's push the topic of the cards aside. Next, we'll talk about the character popularity vote!

S: You are going to hold one?

L: No, it's not officially declared yet. But lots of fan letters brought up the topic of opening a vote, and it looks like the author started considering it too.

S: But the question is how, isn't it?

L: It is. Because of that, the author does not want to start it right away. One vote per person does not look fun, especially since counting them would be difficult. Also, as per my suggestion in the afterword of "The Cursed Sword of Bezeld", some readers might spend a whole fortune on sending in votes. So, we'll open an idea contest about how the Slayers popularity vote should be held!

S: How clever of you to make events out of everything!

L: The conditions are the same as before. The method with the most votes wins if the editor also agrees to it! Also, the method must be funny!

S: By the way, when is the entry deadline?

L: It's when the author decides to open the new popularity vote, of course!

S: The third popularity vote… I hope I can make it to fourth place this time…

L: Then we'll be waiting for some great ideas! See you!